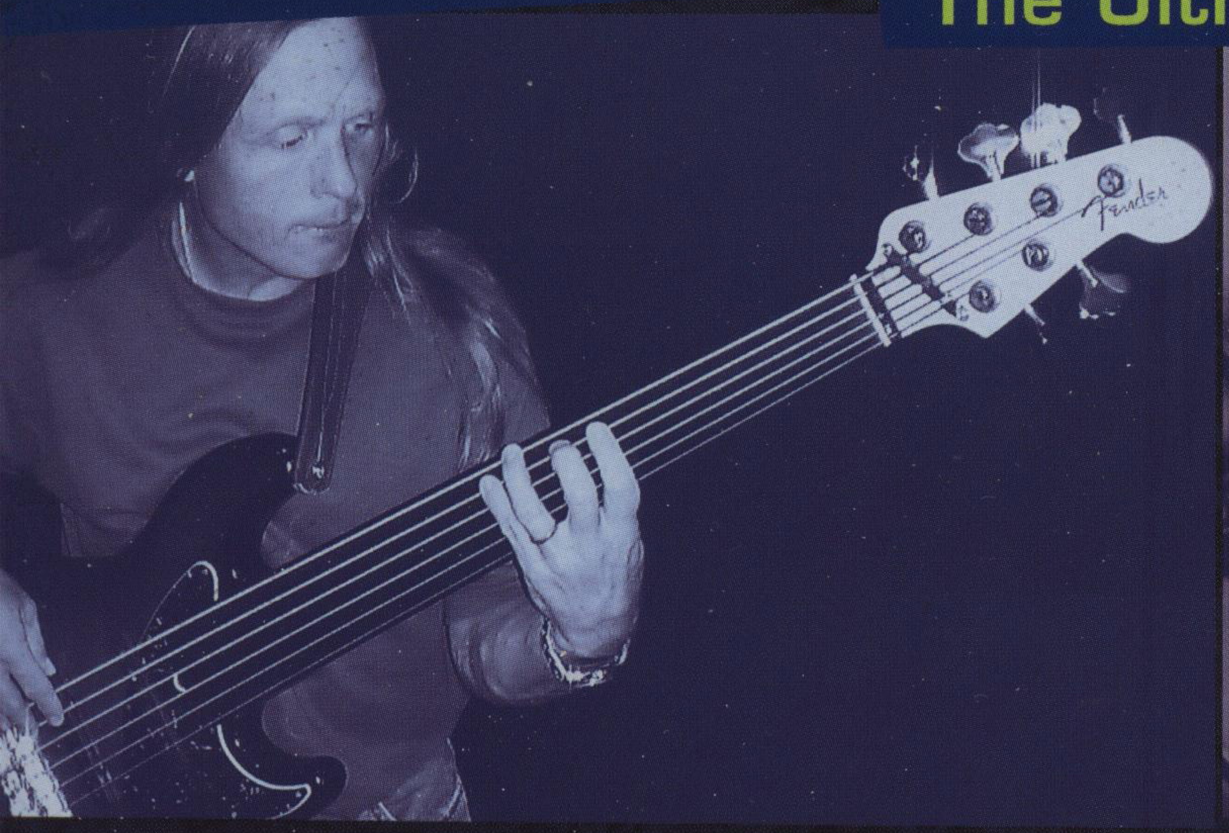
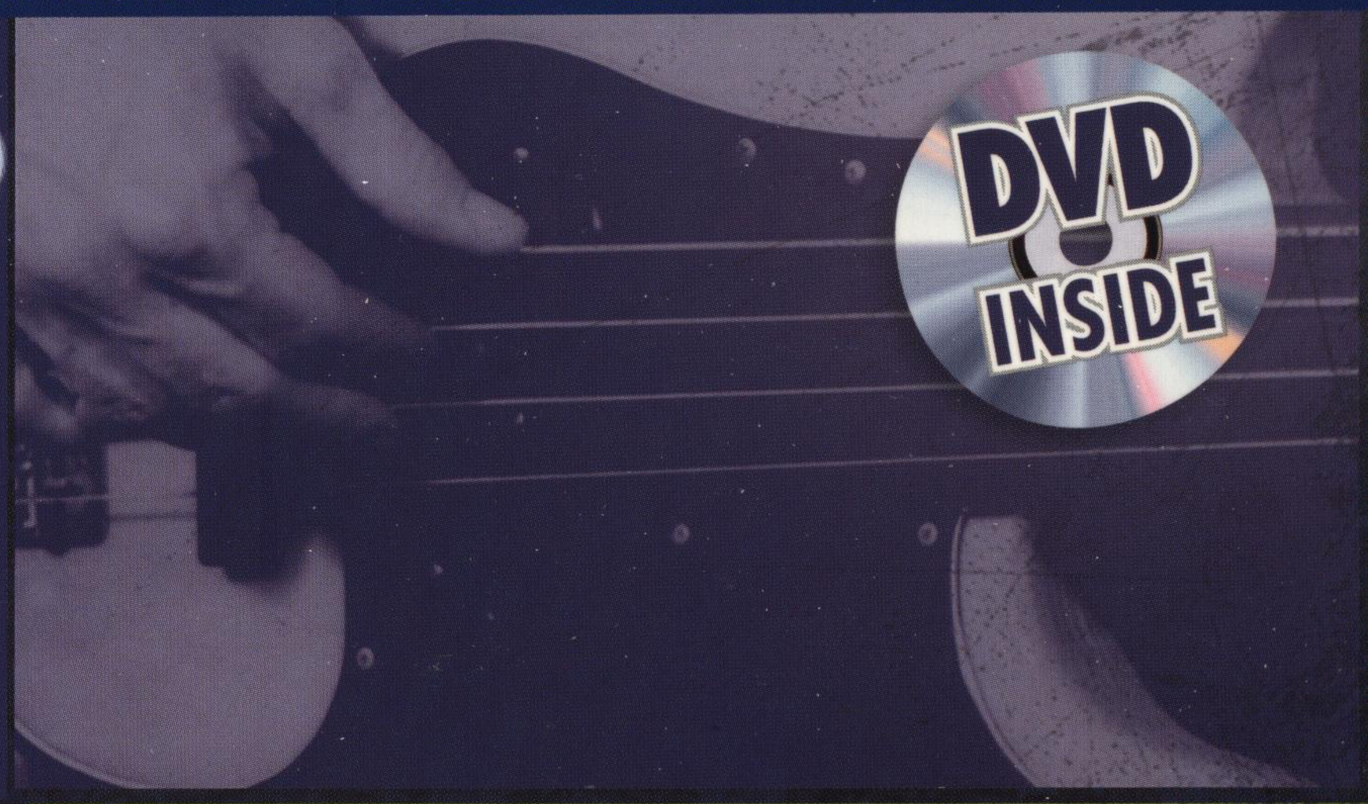
VISIT…

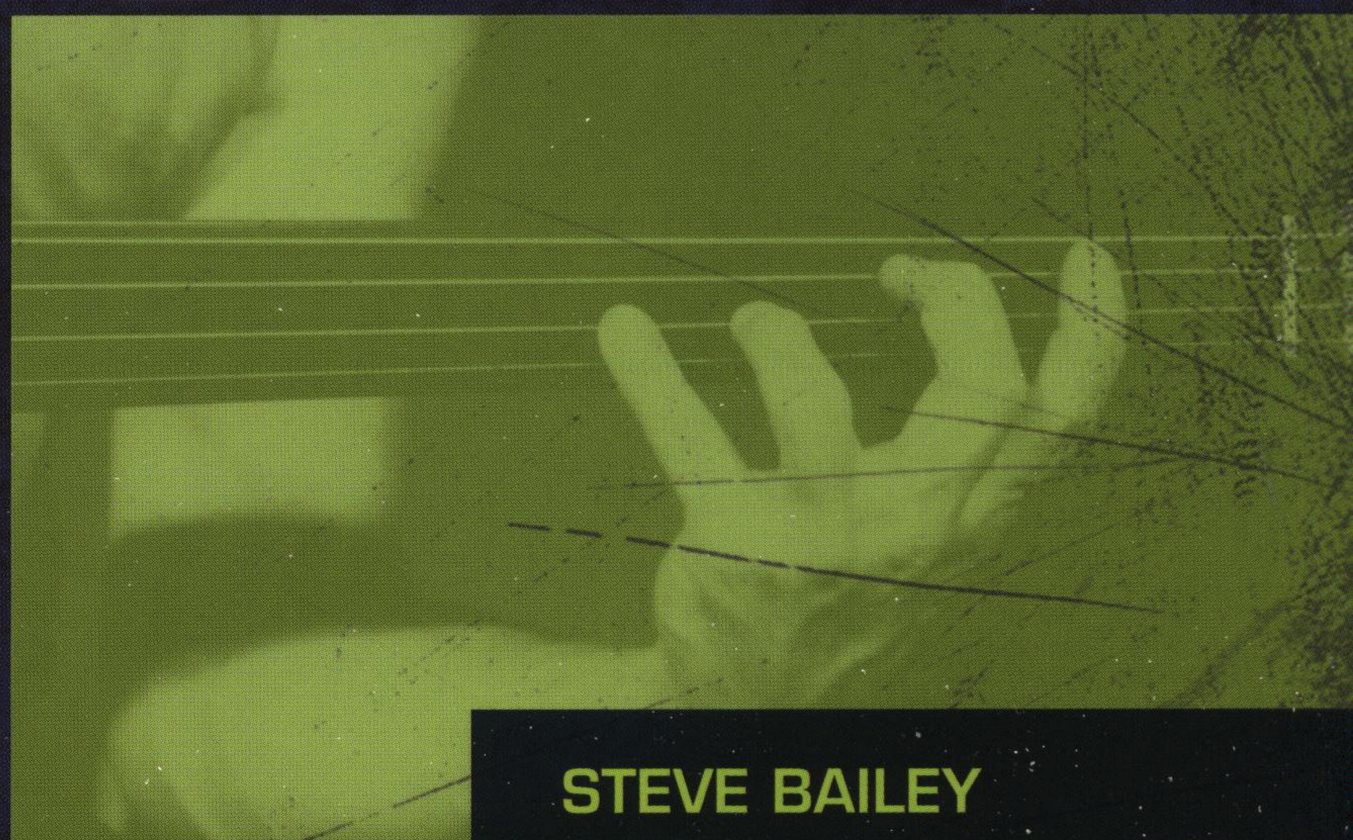
STEVE BAILEY'S

FRETLESS BASS

The Ultimate Fretless Bass Workout







STEVE BAILEY

- Develop great intonation
- Enhance left-hand technique
- Cultivate a better "ear"
- Learn sliding and string-blending techniques
- Develop vibrato, harmonics, and the fretless "growl"

Alfred

STEVE BAILEY'S FRETLESS BASS

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Introduction

Given a misnomer, the fretless bass seems to be the instrument we "fret" over the most. Intonation is the hurdle that prevents most bassists from using this instrument, both live and in the studio. Nothing sounds worse than an out-of-tune bass. It destroys the pitch center of the band and makes everyone sound out of tune.

This course is designed to develop good left-hand habits that will not only result in accurate fretless intonation, but will also add accuracy and cleanliness to your fretted playing. Ear training is very important to good intonation. Along with your left-hand "cleanliness" will come a vastly improved ear, and fingerings will be much more logical (in other words, less shifting).

Some of the beginning exercises may seem boring or laborious, but they are absolutely necessary for building solid pitch (much like a horn player playing long tones). As you concentrate on your left hand and ear, try to consider what your right hand is doing (long tones and slow rhythms are also great for perfecting right-hand two- or three-finger alternation).

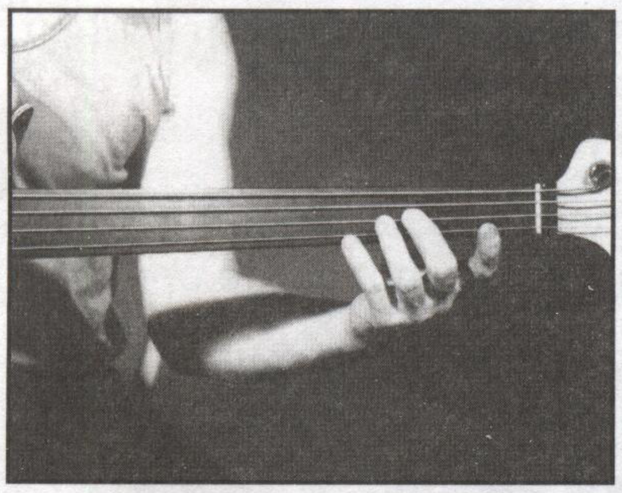
TAB has been added to help suggest positions and show shifts, as well as help those unfamiliar with standard music notation. Please take this opportunity to improve your reading by relating the written notation to the TAB. A great end result of using this book would be for you to become a great fretless player AND a good reader

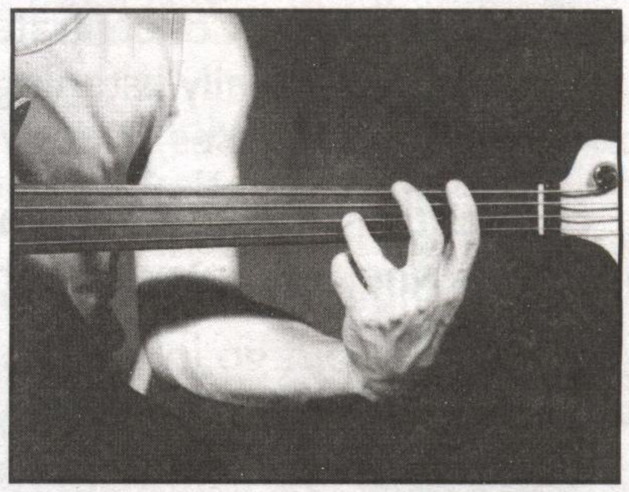
A Few Practice Tips for Fretless Bass

1. Always practice with a metronome or drum machine. Improve your time while you improve your technique.
2. Develop your ears, not your eyes. Concentrate on what sounds in tune and what doesn't. When you combine a good ear (from really listening) with accurate muscle memory (from concentrating on technique exercises), you will not have to rely on your eyes.
3. While practicing, constantly check your intonation by using open strings and harmonics as points of reference. For example, when you play a D on the G string, stop and compare it to the open D string.
4. This is going to sound crazy, but go into a room, turn out the lights, close all of the curtains, and practice the exercises from memory. Let your ears, hands, and fingerboard become one. Next, put on some music and play along in the dark. You will soon find out how good (or bad) your intonation is. You never know when the lighting director is going to black out the stage.
5. When you get frustrated, put your bass down and go do something else for a while. Come back to it fresh and ready to absorb. A frustrated or bored mind does not retain information nearly as well as a fresh, open one.

Unit 1: Basic Octave Intonation

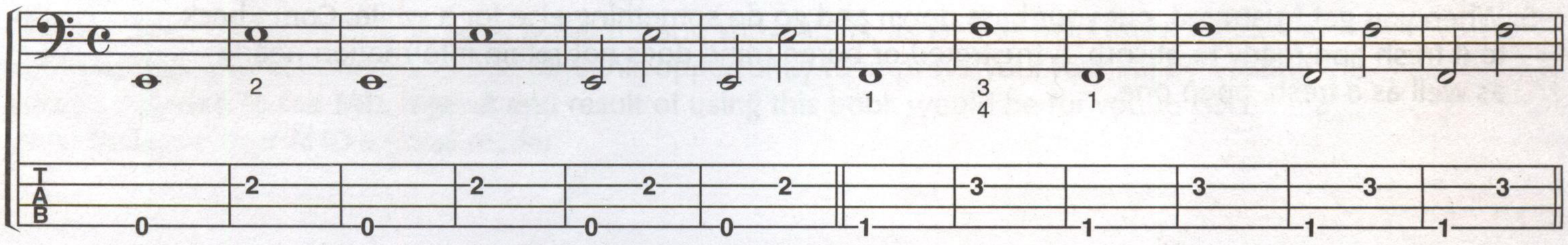
Exercise 1: Let the notes ring so you can hear the "waves" in the intervals. The waves, or chorusing, indicate that one of the pitches is slightly out of tune. Re-attack them to be sure of the pitch.





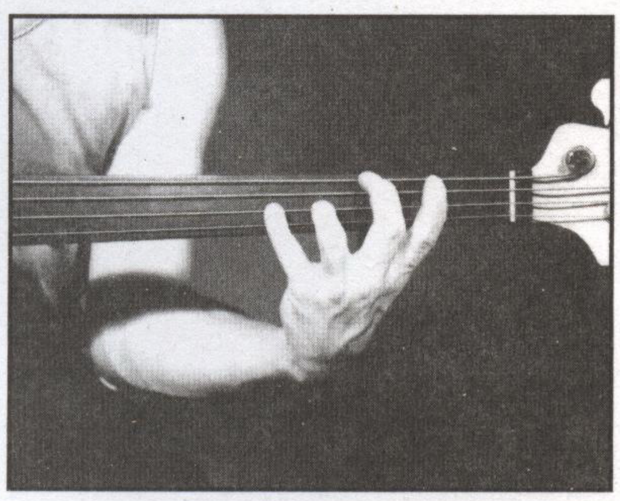
Slow

(Let all notes ring.)

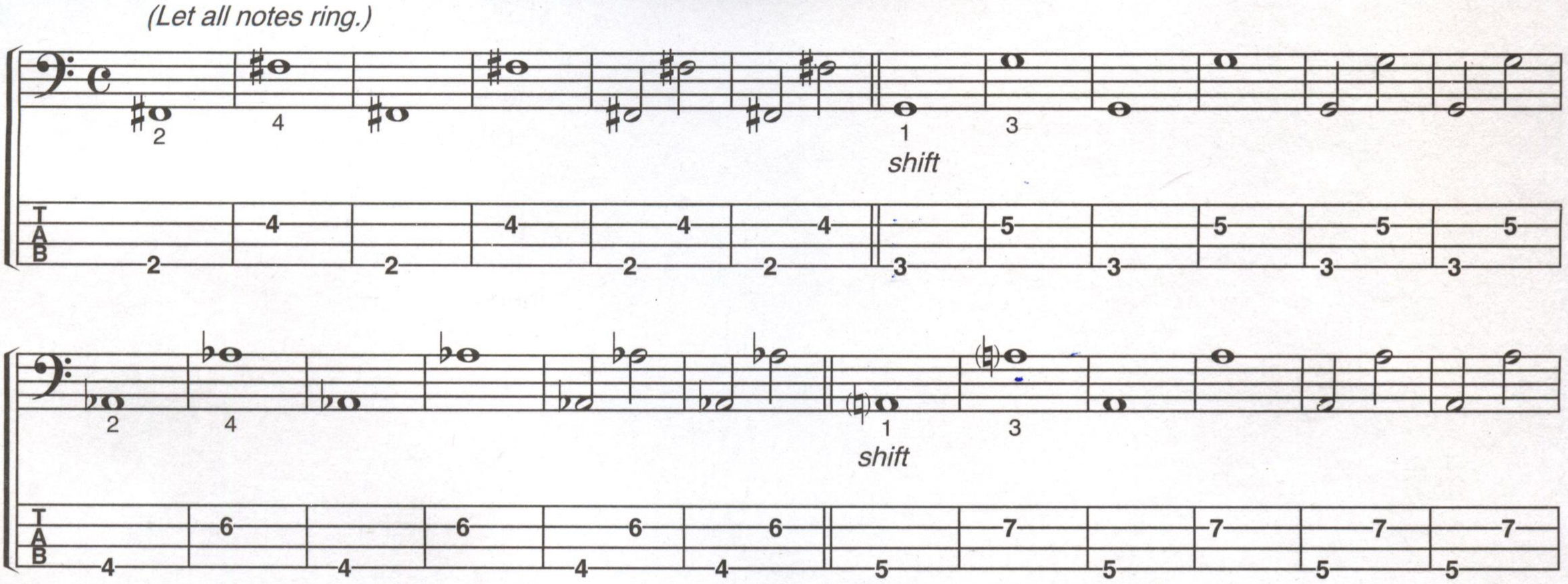


As Exercise 1 becomes solidly in tune, combine it with Exercise 2. Once this feels good, combine Exercises 1–4 and continue to the top range of your instrument.

Exercise 2: I try to group octaves in a 1–3 or 2–4 left-hand finger configuration. If your hands are extremely small, use 1–4. Using 1–3 and 2–4 facilitates faster octaves and keeps the "one-fret-per-finger" concept consistent the entire length of the fretless board.

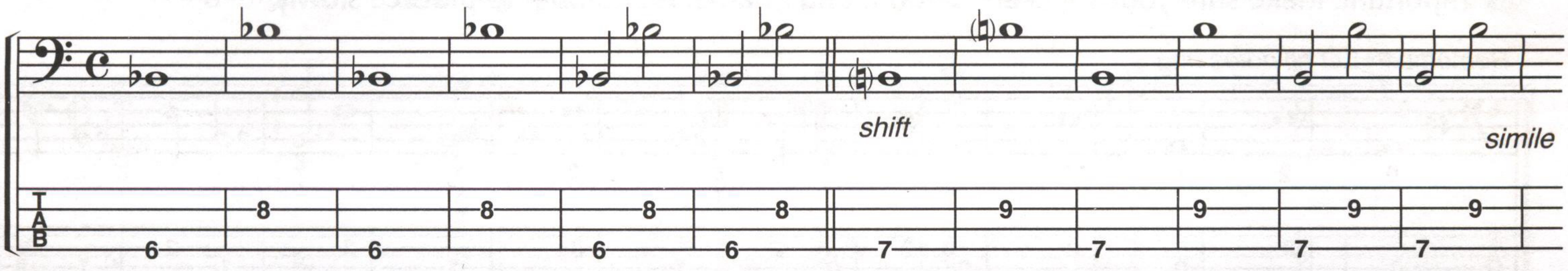


(Let all notes ring.)

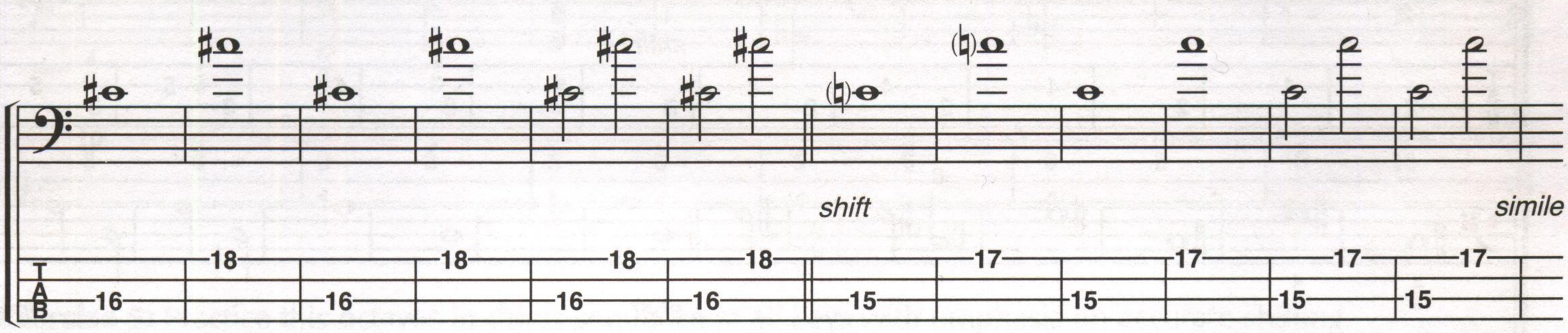


After a while, you may want to double up the rhythmic values to make the exercises go by a little quicker. Be aware of your right-hand finger alternation, and you will develop your right-hand consistency along with your left-hand accuracy.

Exercise 3: Your hand is probably tired or hurting by now. Rest for a minute and continue this exercise to the top of your fingerboard, switching to the A and G strings somewhere around the 8th–10th position.



Exercise 4: On your way back down, you will be shifting from 1–3 to 2–4. Make sure these are both deliberate and accurate. Accurate shifting is a very large piece of the "intonation pie."



No one plays in tune 100 percent of the time. One of the largest ingredients in the "intonation pie" is your ability to adjust quickly. This involves three steps:

1. Play the note.

2. Analyze it as sharp, flat, or dead on, aurally, then visually, if necessary.

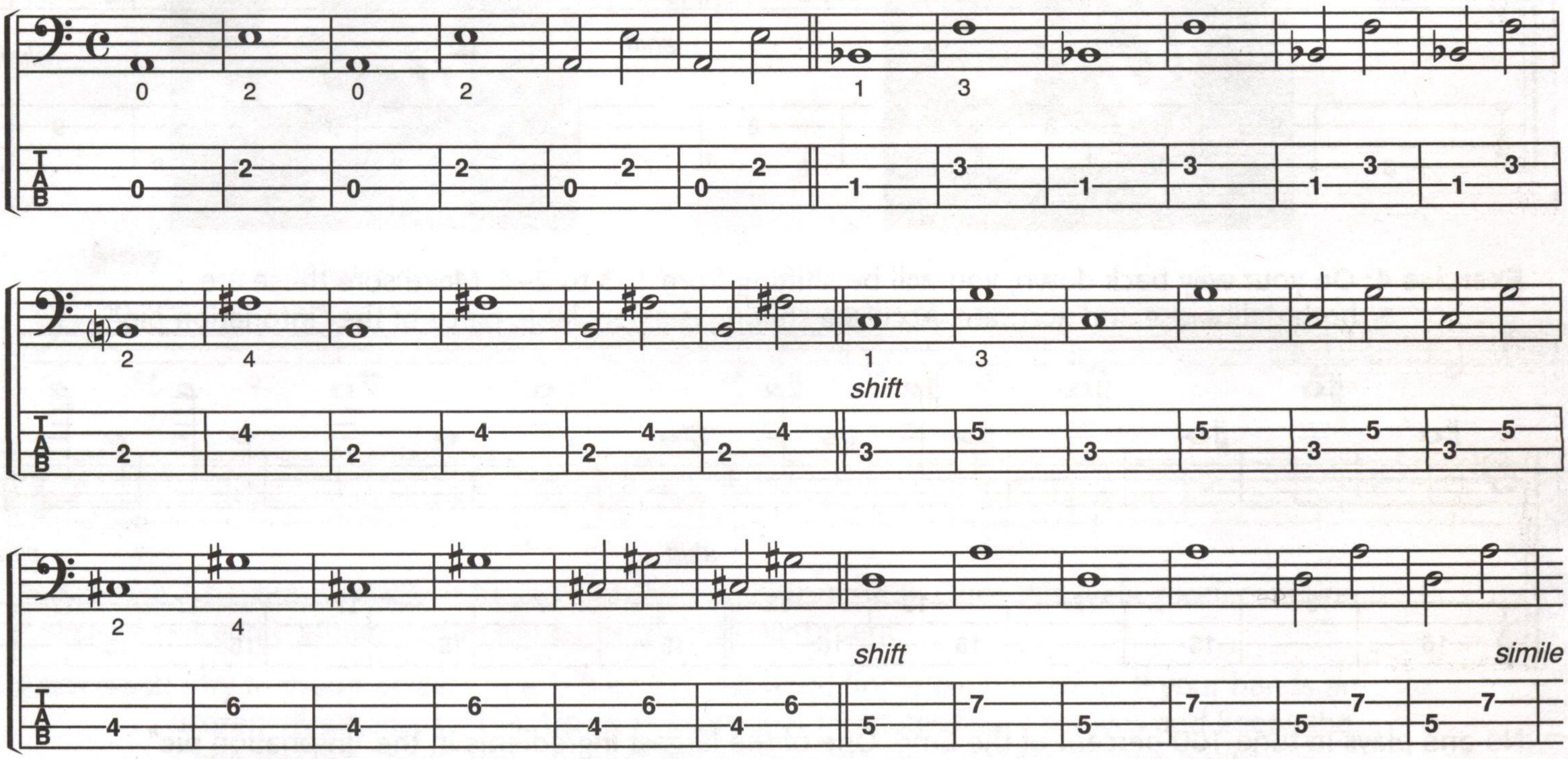
3. Adjust your fingers accordingly.

Note: the speed with which you accomplish this process will determine your intonation percentage.

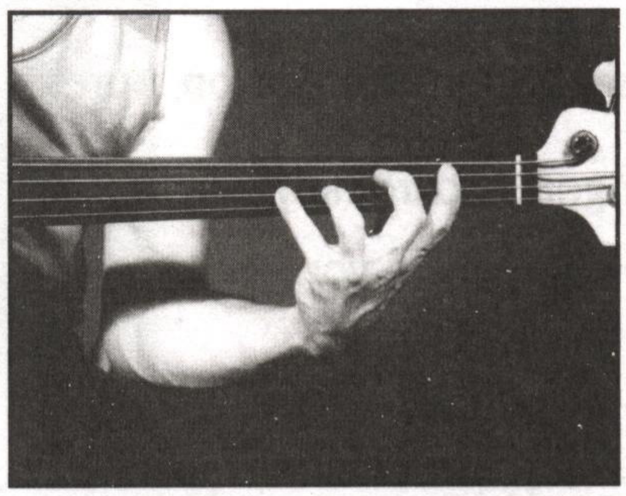
Unit 2: Fifths

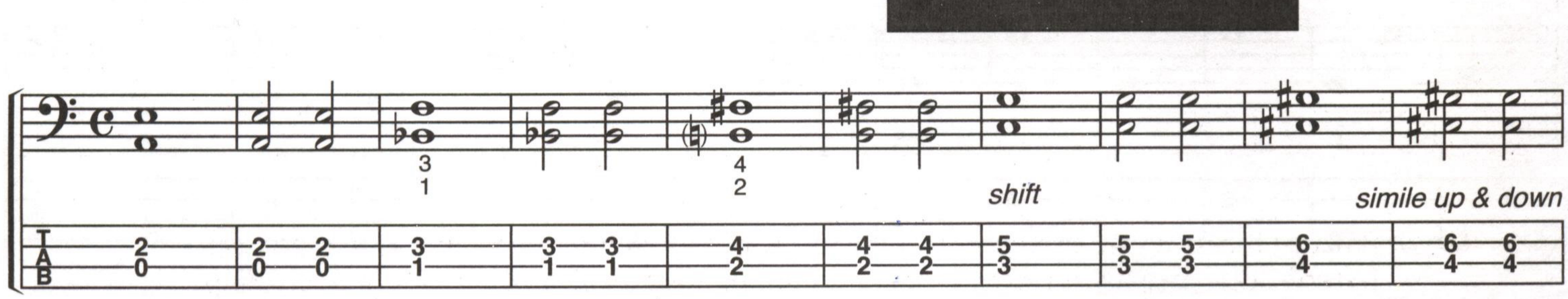
Exercise 1: After getting solid octaves under your fingers, the next logical left-hand spacing exercise would be concerned with fifths. Although not as easy to hear as octaves, they are equally as important. Make sure your shifts are smooth and in time. Remember to practice slowly.

Remember: Let all notes ring.



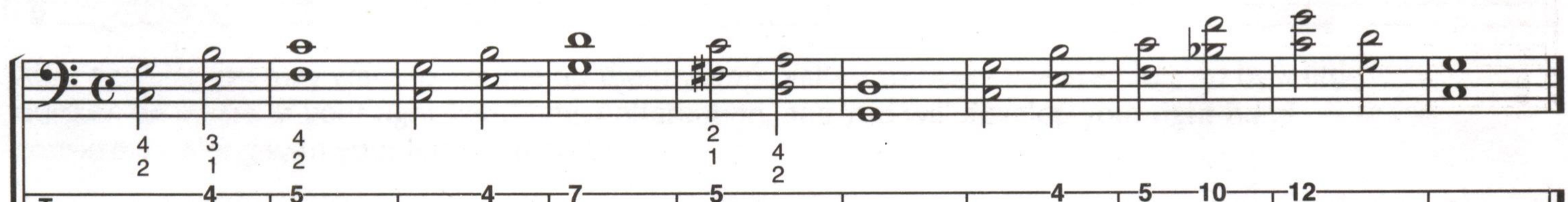
Exercise 2: Move these intervals all the way up the fingerboard and back down. Listen carefully for waves in pitch. The secret is to adjust immediately! As the intervals become closer (octaves, fifths, etc.), they become increasingly harder to hear in the lower register.





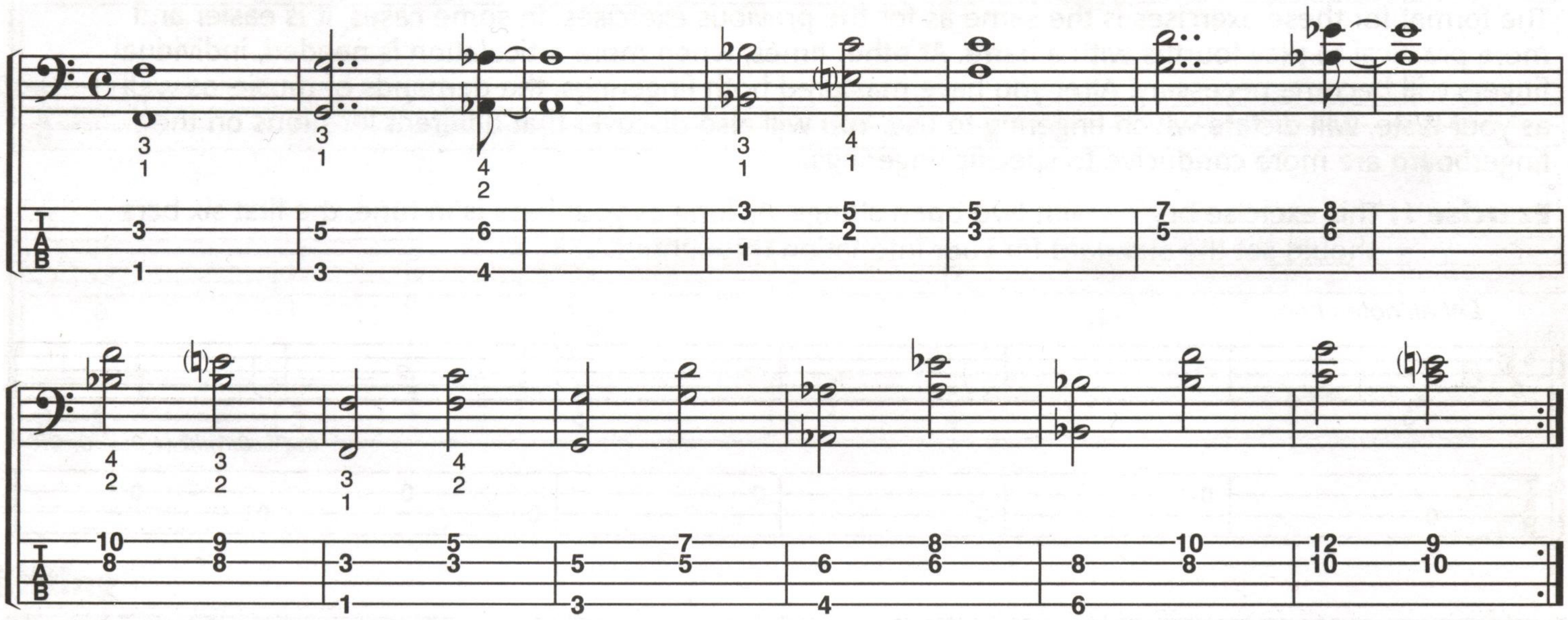
Shifting

Exercise 3: Remember to use open strings whenever possible to check intonation. This exercise puts emphasis on shifts as well as intonation. Practice slowly, and make sure your shifts are accurate.

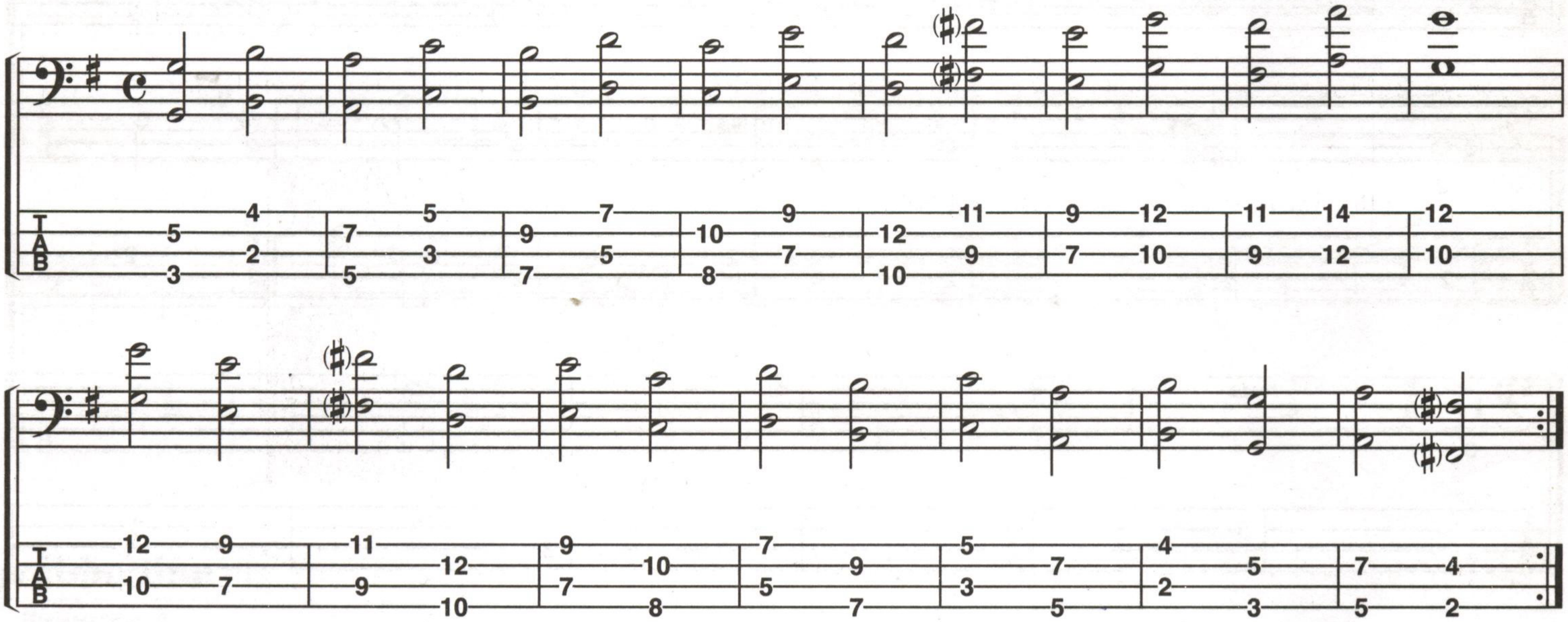


Combination

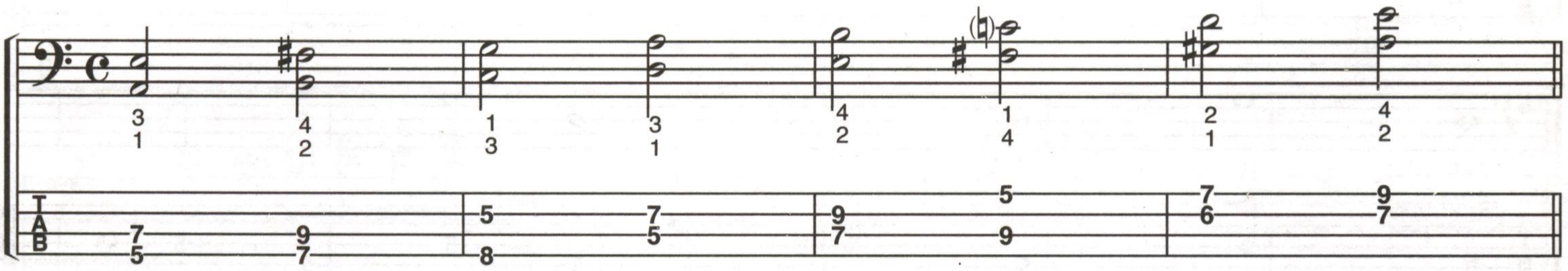
Exercise 4: This exercise is much harder than it appears. Practice very slowly at first, letting the notes sustain as long as possible before making a smooth and accurate shift. Fingerings are suggested, but feel free to make up your own as long as they make sense.



Exercise 5: Practice this octaves-in-thirds sequence in all keys with emphasis on accurate shifting.



Exercise 6: Practice this exercise of melodic minor in fifths with different patterns and fingerings. Listen! Don't forget your right-hand alternation. Practice all scales in fifths, ascending and descending.

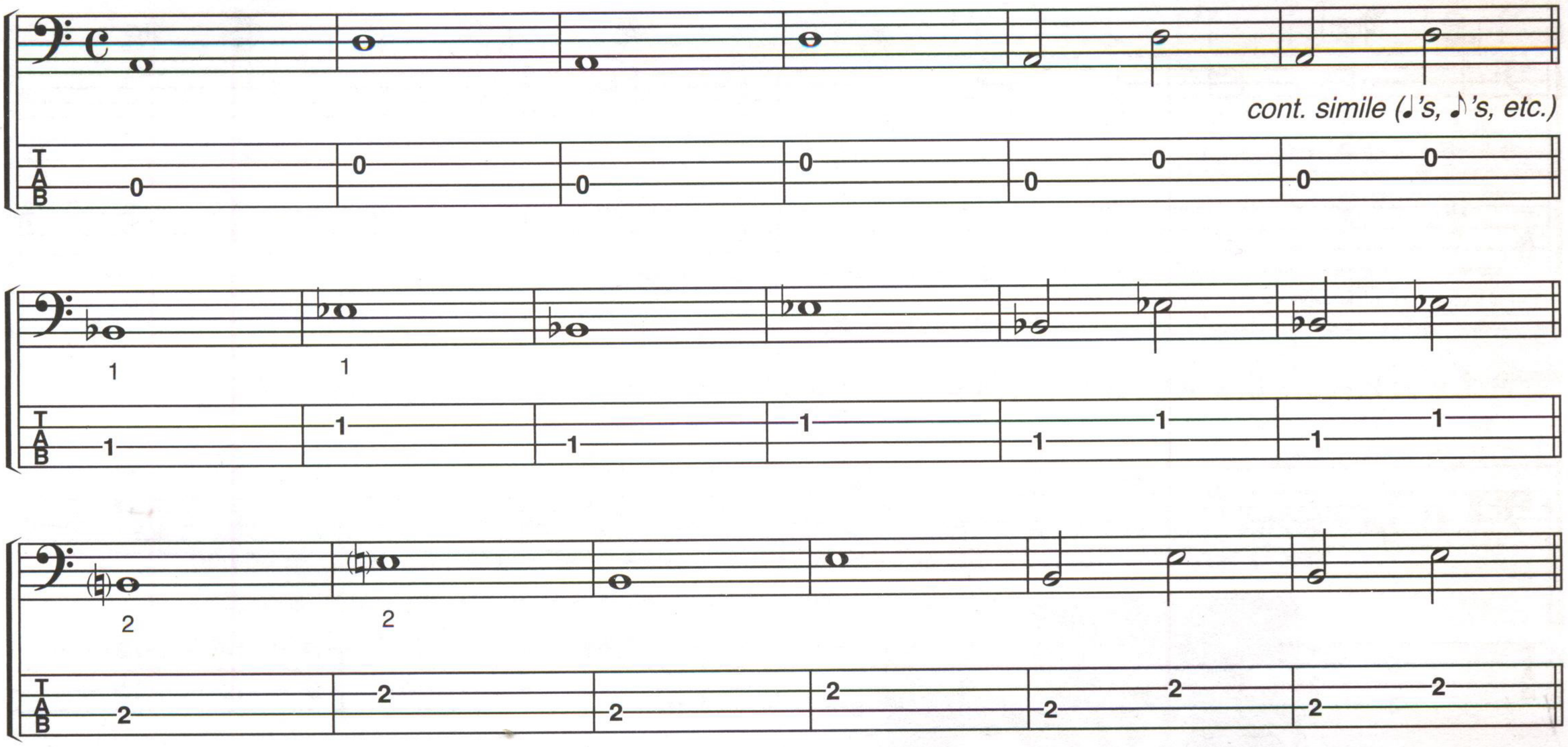


Unit 3: Fourths

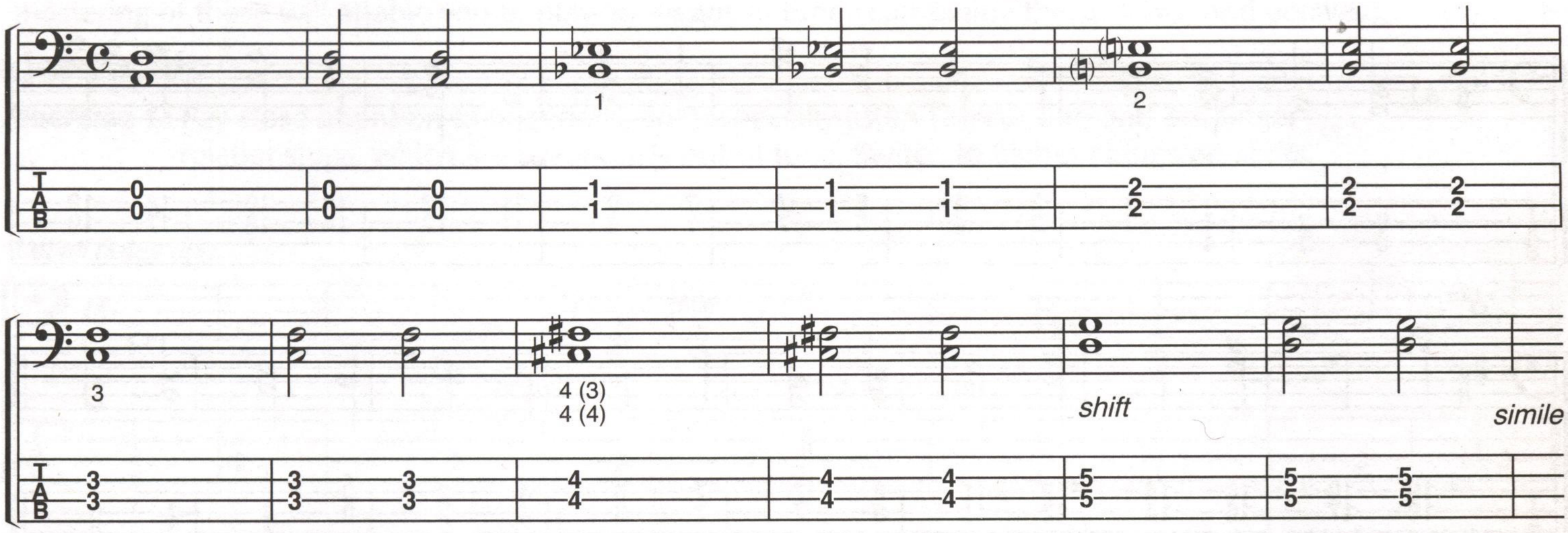
Fourths, which are actually inverted fifths (C–G = fifth, G–C = fourth), are the next step on the intonation trail. Fourths are quite common in conventional bass lines. As double stops, they offer "power chord" possibilities. (For a complete discussion of power chords, see the book *Rock Bass*, also by Steve Bailey.)

The format for these exercises is the same as for the previous exercises. In some cases, it is easier and more practical to play fourths with a barre. At other times, when more articulation is needed, individual fingers will become necessary. After you have mastered both fingerings, the demands of music, as well as your taste, will dictate which fingering to use. You will also discover that different locations on the fingerboard are more conducive to specific fingerings.

Exercise 1: This exercise begins with two open strings. As long as your bass is in tune, the first six bars should set the standard for your intonation throughout.



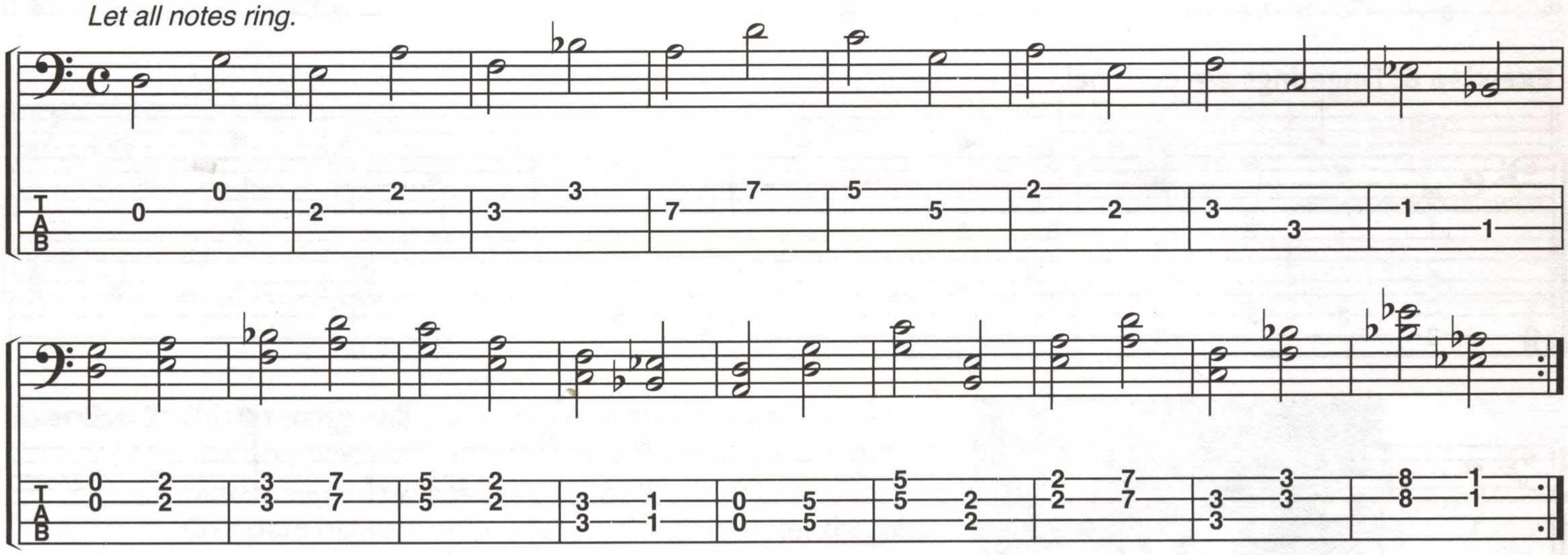
Exercise 2: Once again, let the first two bars be your pitch standard. Memorize that sound. Vary your fingerings.



Shifting

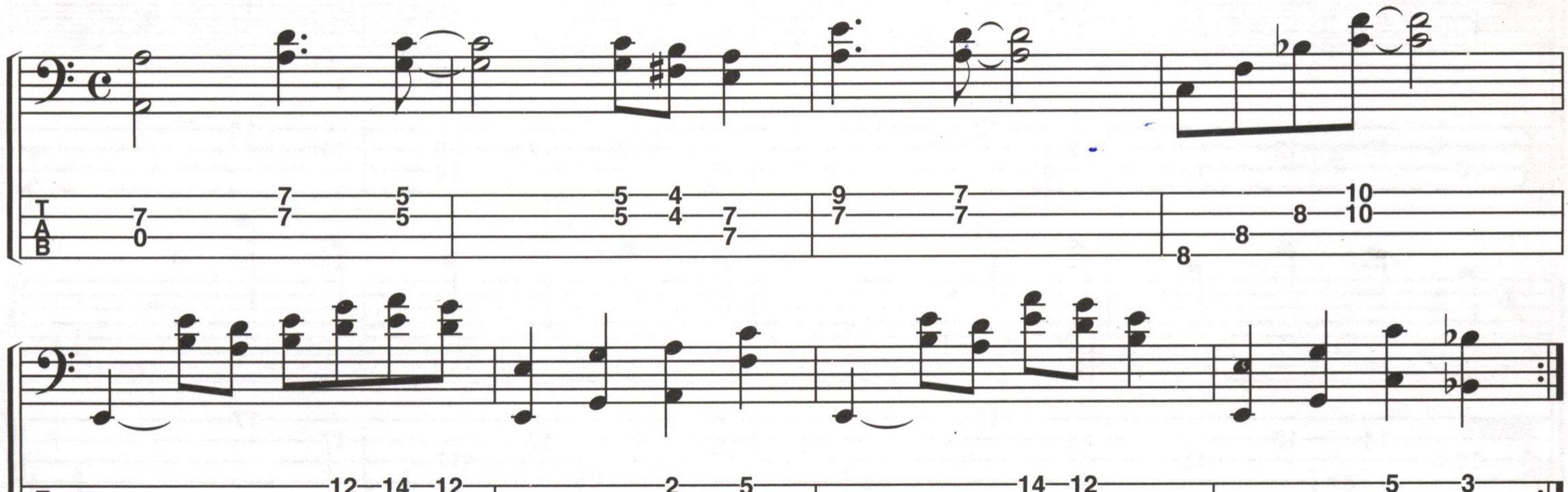
Exercise 3: Play this one in different positions.

Let all notes ring.

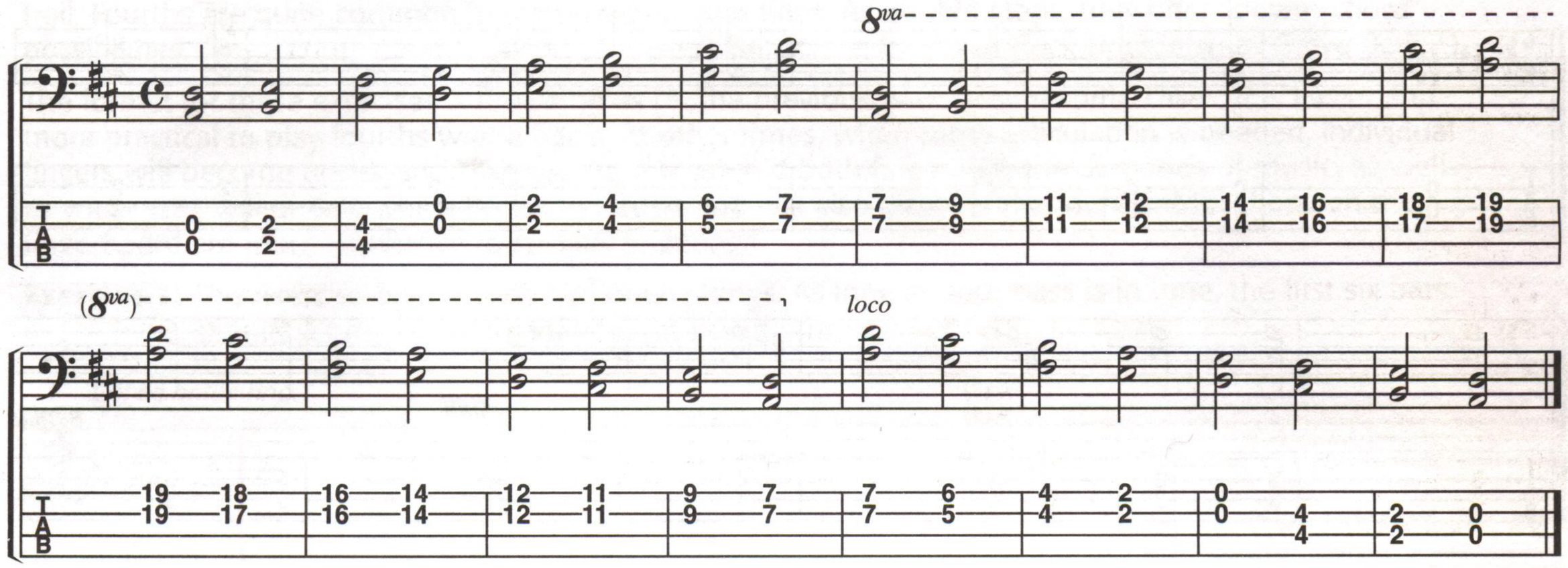


Combination

Exercise 4

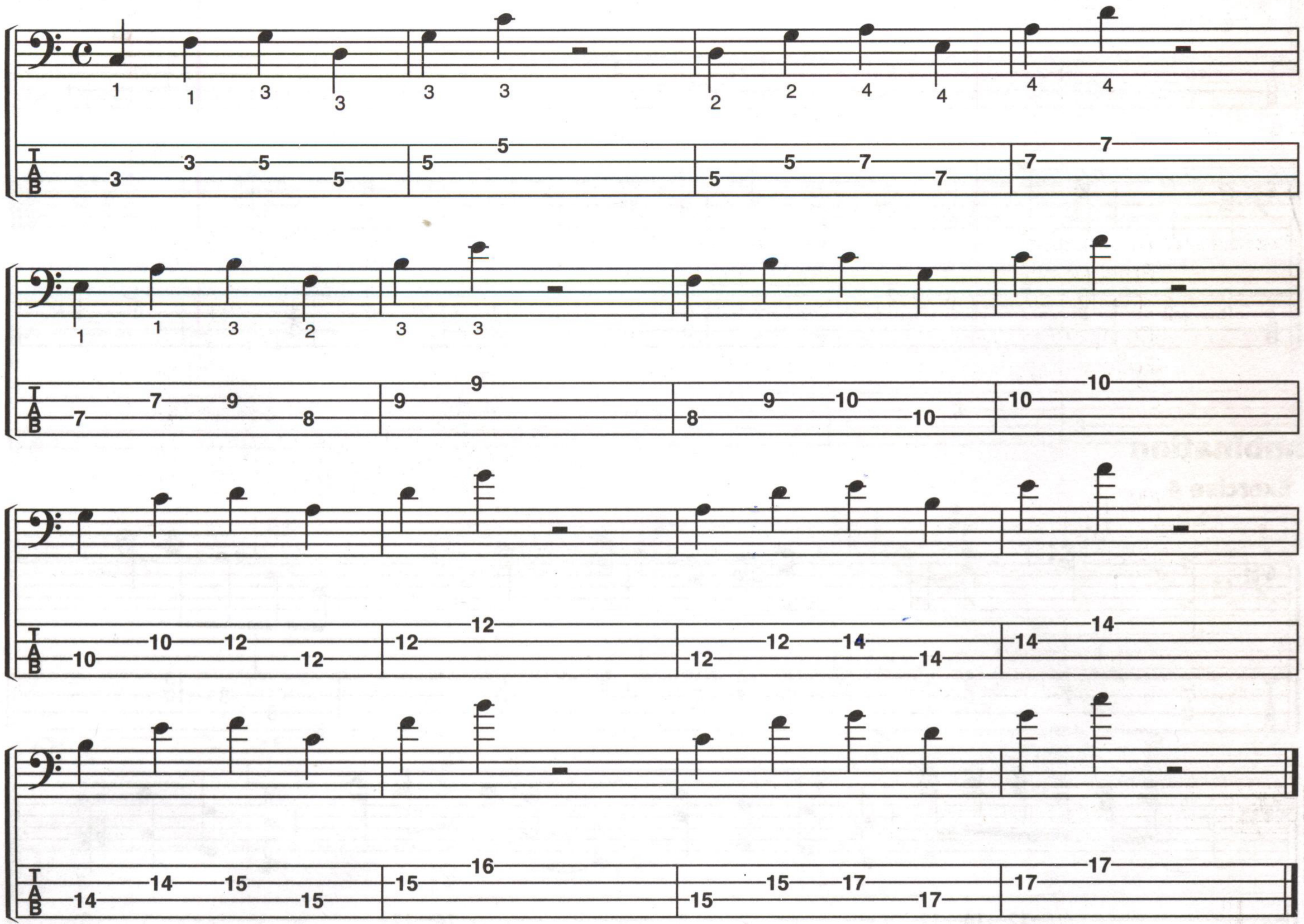


Exercise 5: Make fingerings and shifts consistent and accurate. Transpose to other keys, both major and minor.



As you transpose these exercises to other keys, you are exploring your instrument. Don't just memorize a pattern and move around the fingerboard. Know what notes are under your fingers at all times as well as how they relate to the key center. I realize this doesn't affect your intonation, but it does enhance your overall musicianship immensely. Fingerboard knowledge is important!

Exercise 6: Fingerings are optional.



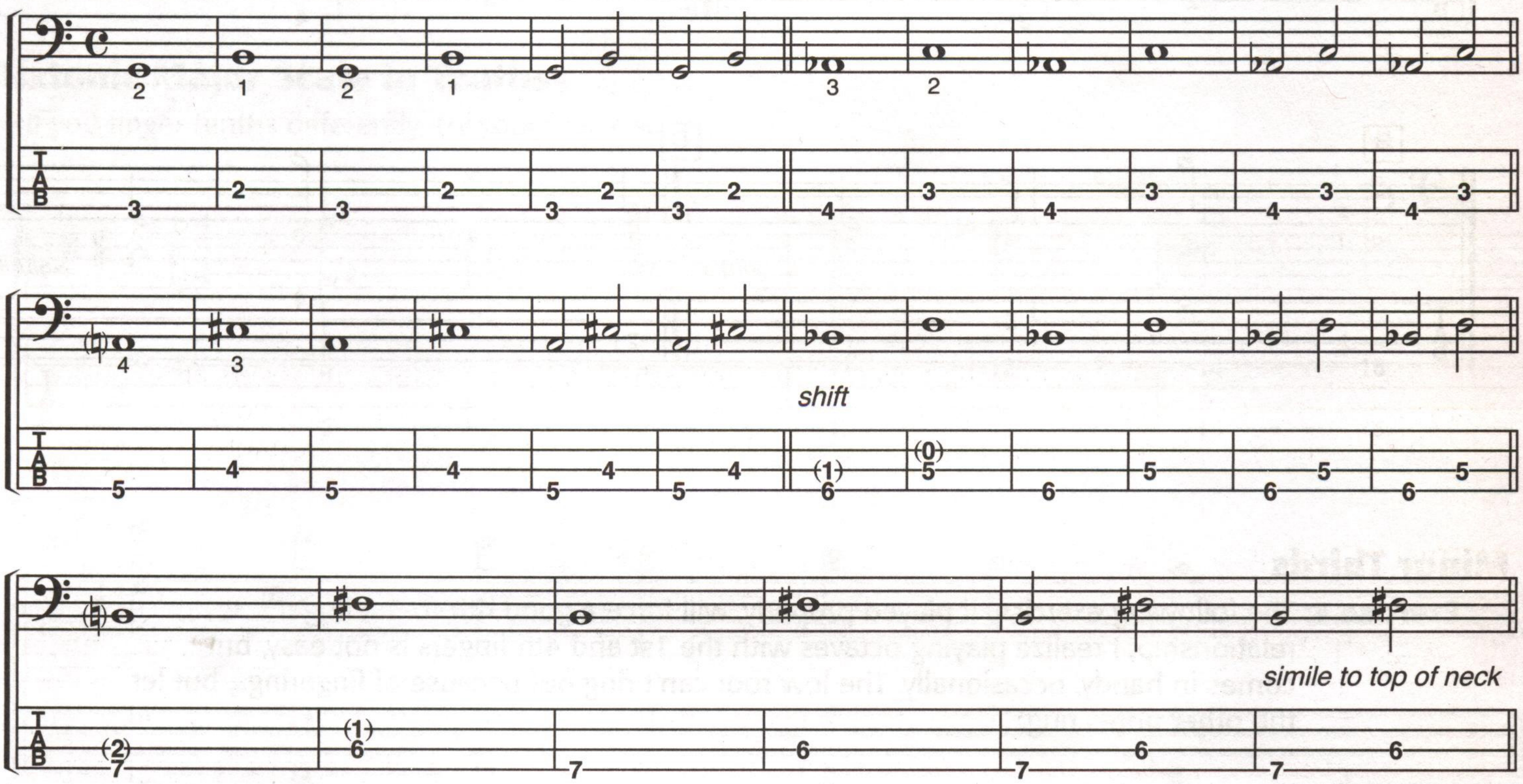
Unit 4: Thirds and Tenths

Assuming you have the octaves and fifths down, we will progress to thirds and tenths. The mastering of these will enable you to play arpeggios in tune (combining thirds, fifths, and octaves).

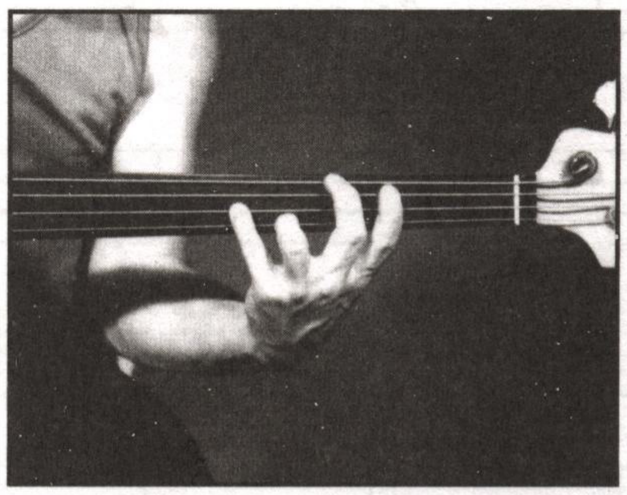
Major Thirds

Exercise 1: Pay close attention to fingerings, and especially listen to your 2nd and 3rd finger relationships, which are notoriously out of tune. Switch to higher strings on shifts.

Let all notes ring.



Exercise 2: This exercise will place much strain on small hands. Practice over and over very slowly, and listen very closely. Let all notes ring over each other!
Compare octaves with octaves, thirds with tenths, etc.
Follow fingerings, and play on fingertips.



Let all notes ring.

Exercise 3: Play on your fingertips, and avoid "breaking joints" (letting your knuckles collapse). Keep all fingers down until shifting.

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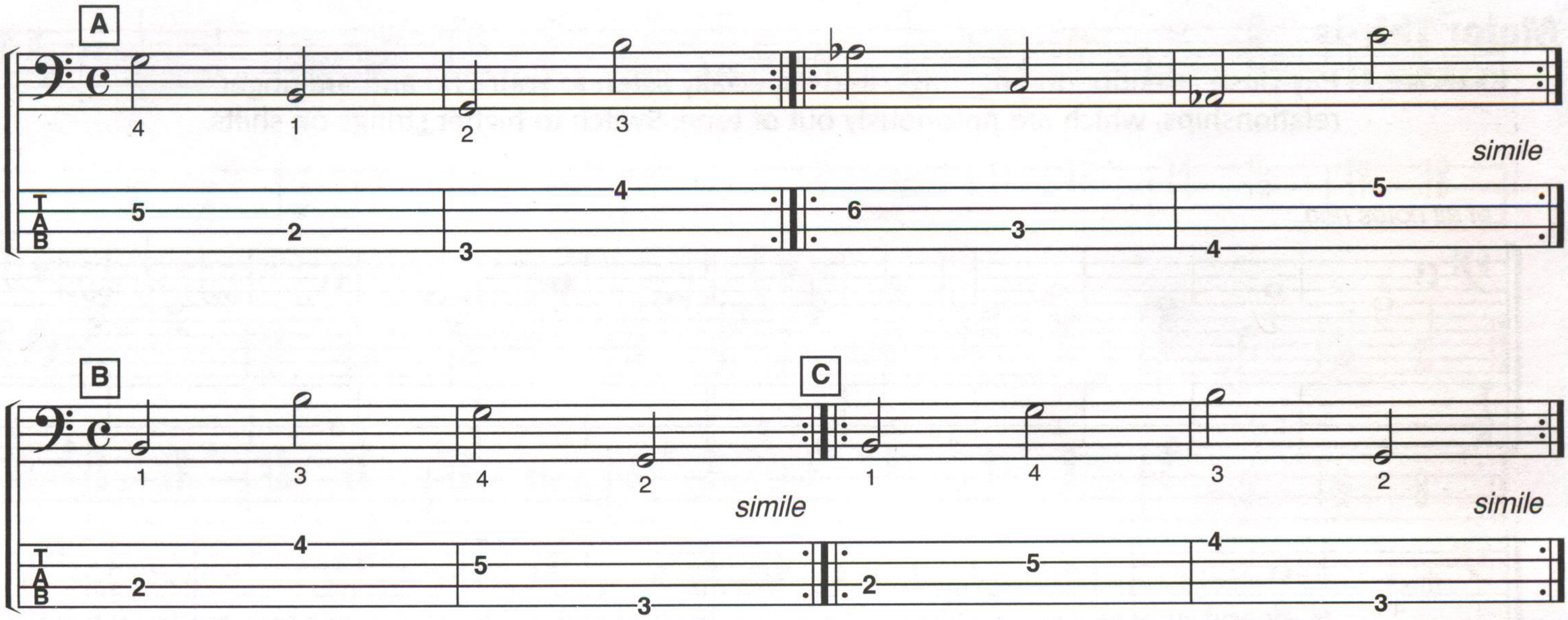
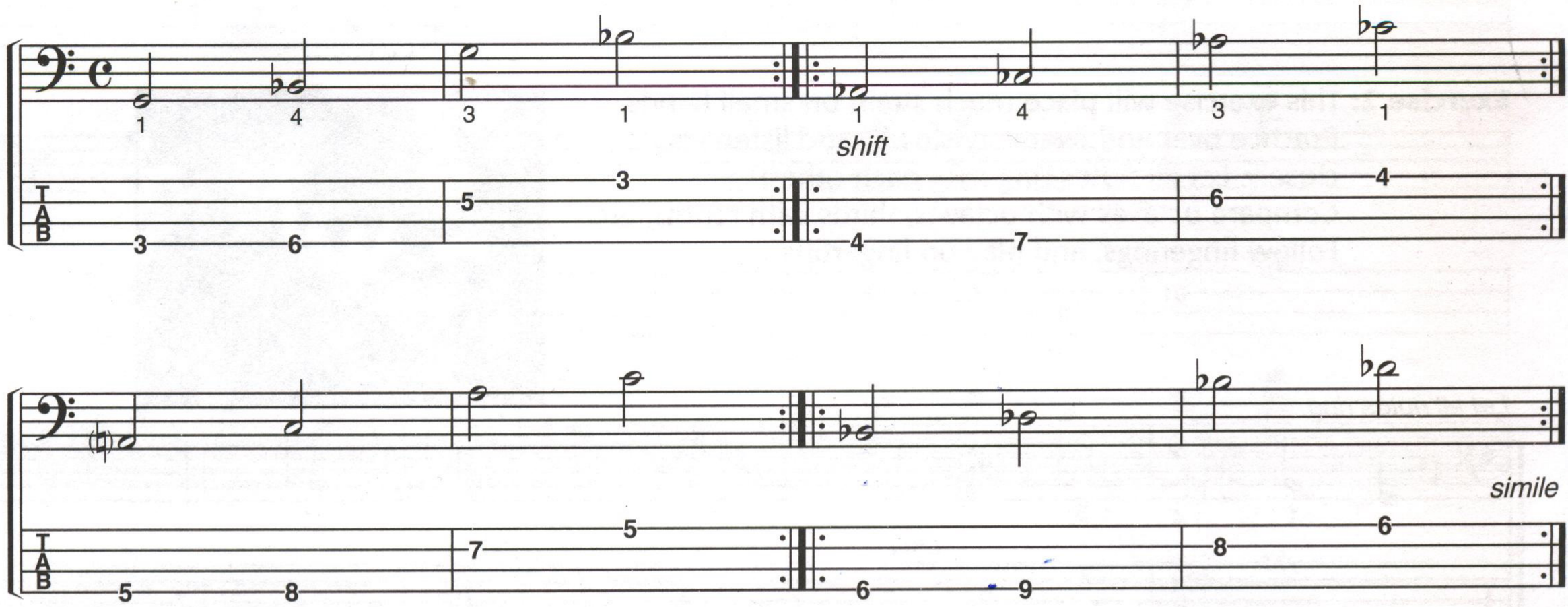


Minor Thirds

Exercise 4: The following exercise, if played properly, will force a good 4th-to-1st finger relationship. I realize playing octaves with the 1st and 4th fingers is not easy, but comes in handy, occasionally. The low root can't ring out because of fingerings, but let the other notes ring.



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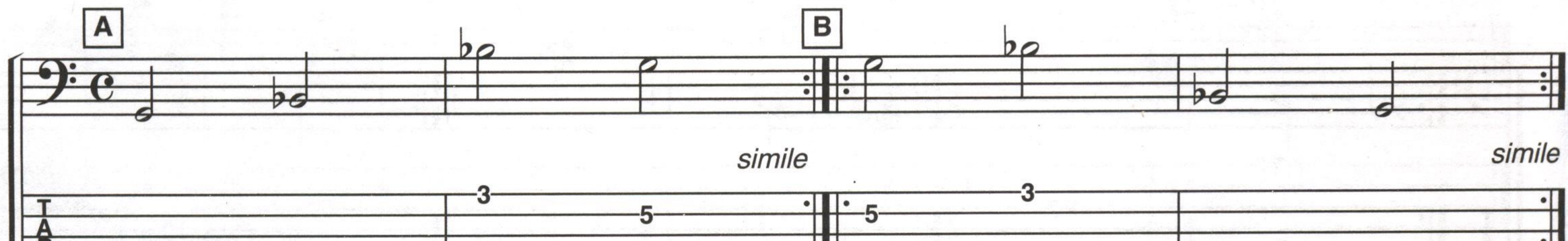
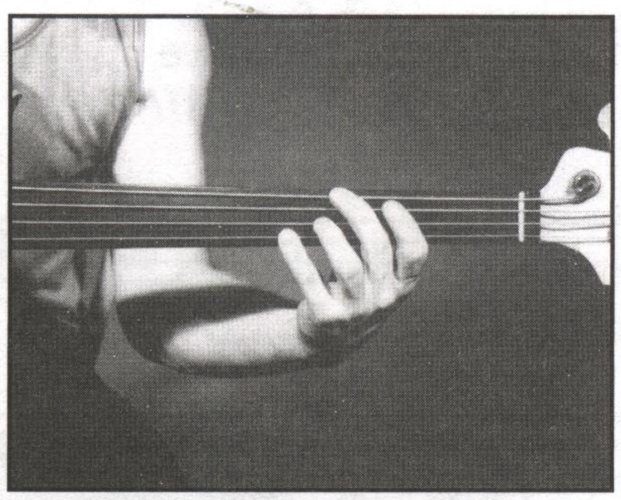
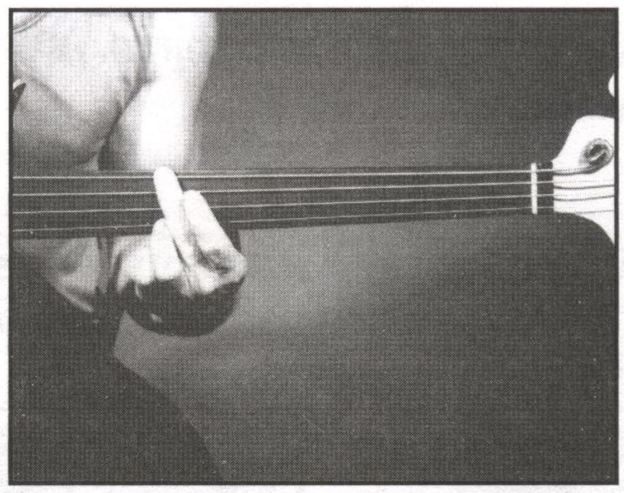
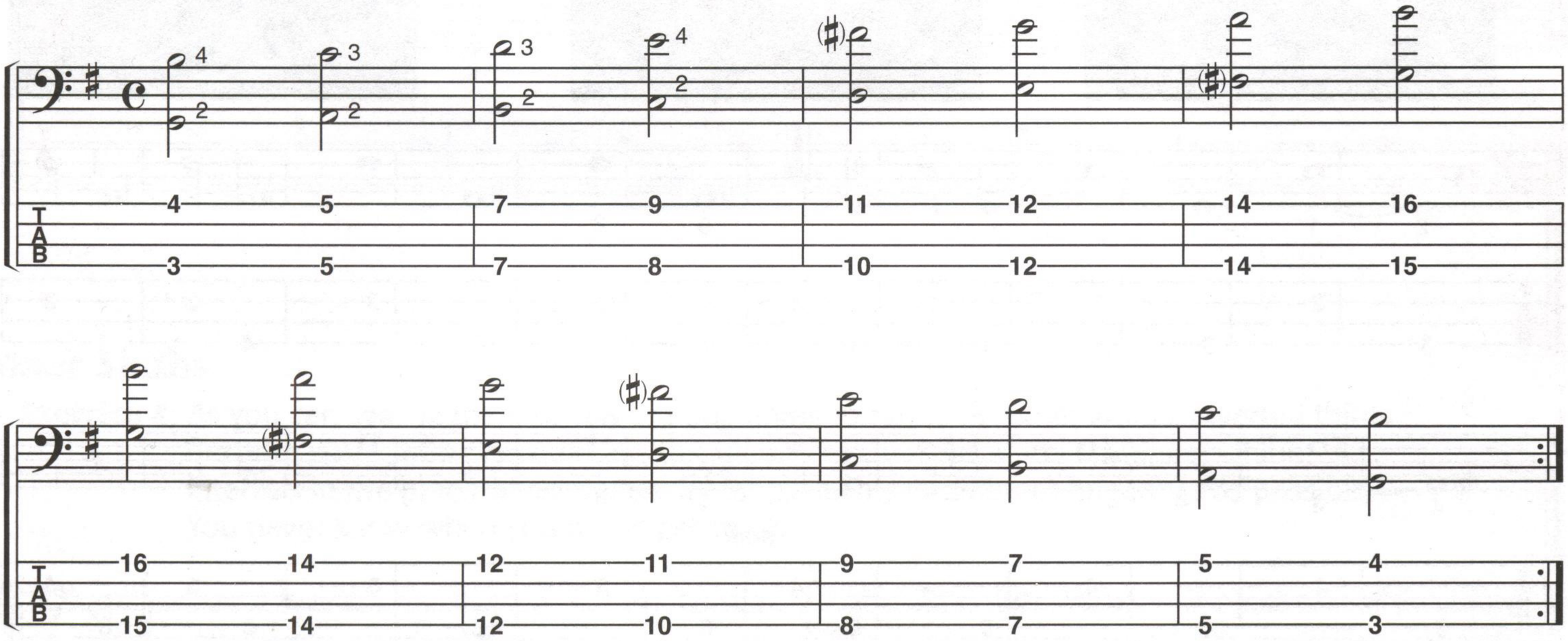




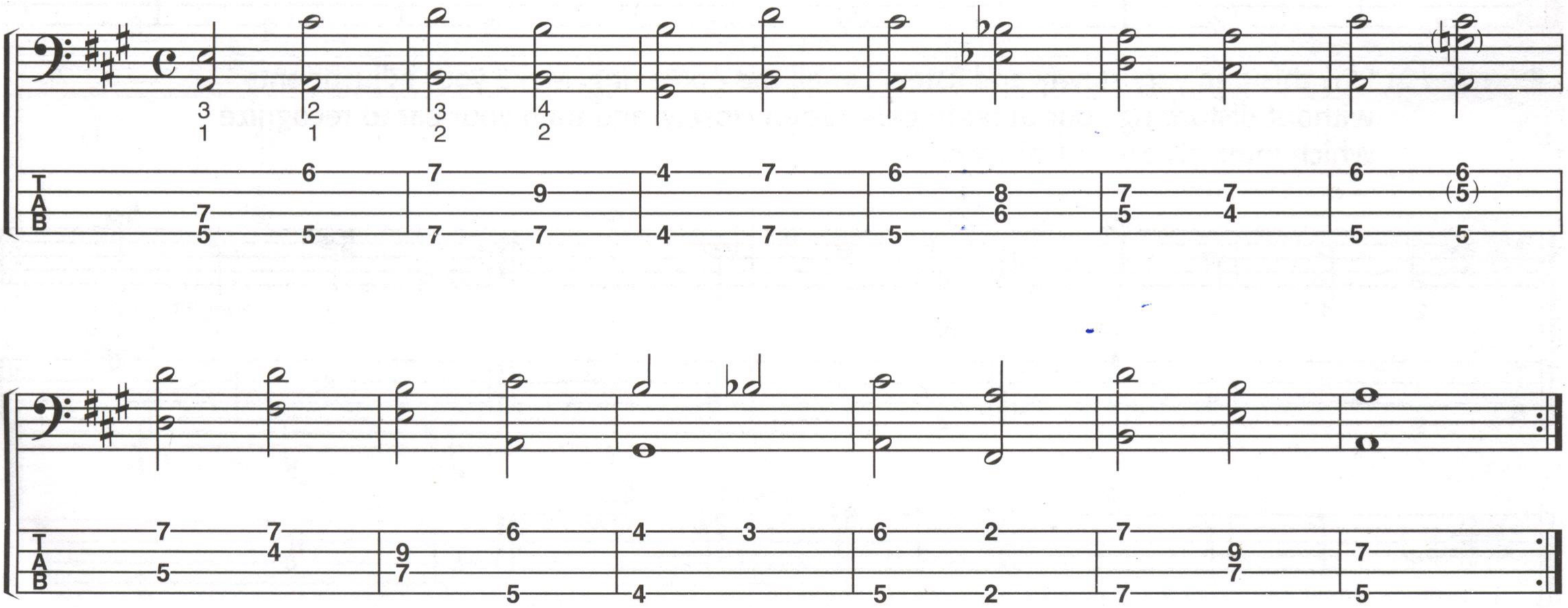


Diatonic Major Scale in Tenths

If you finger tenths differently, try your way also.



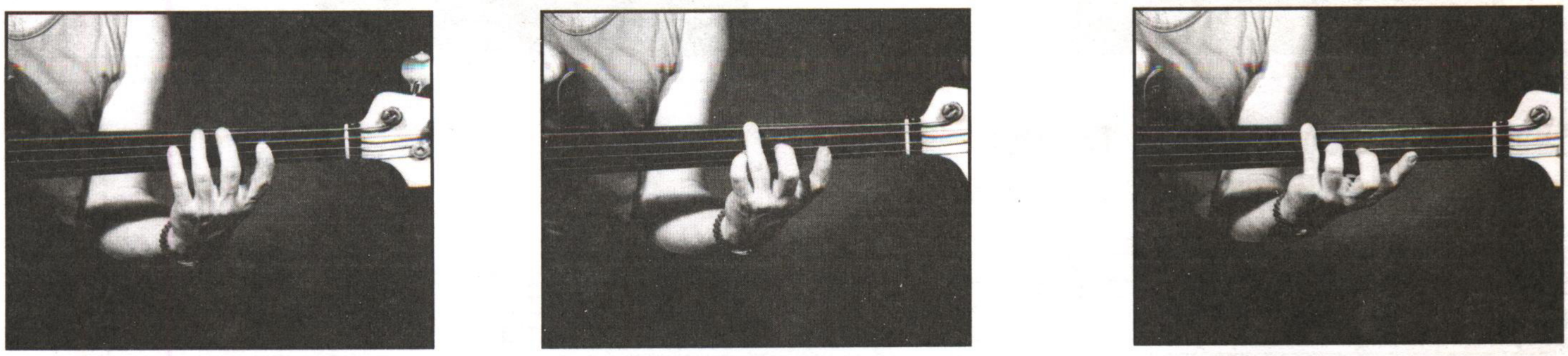
Combination

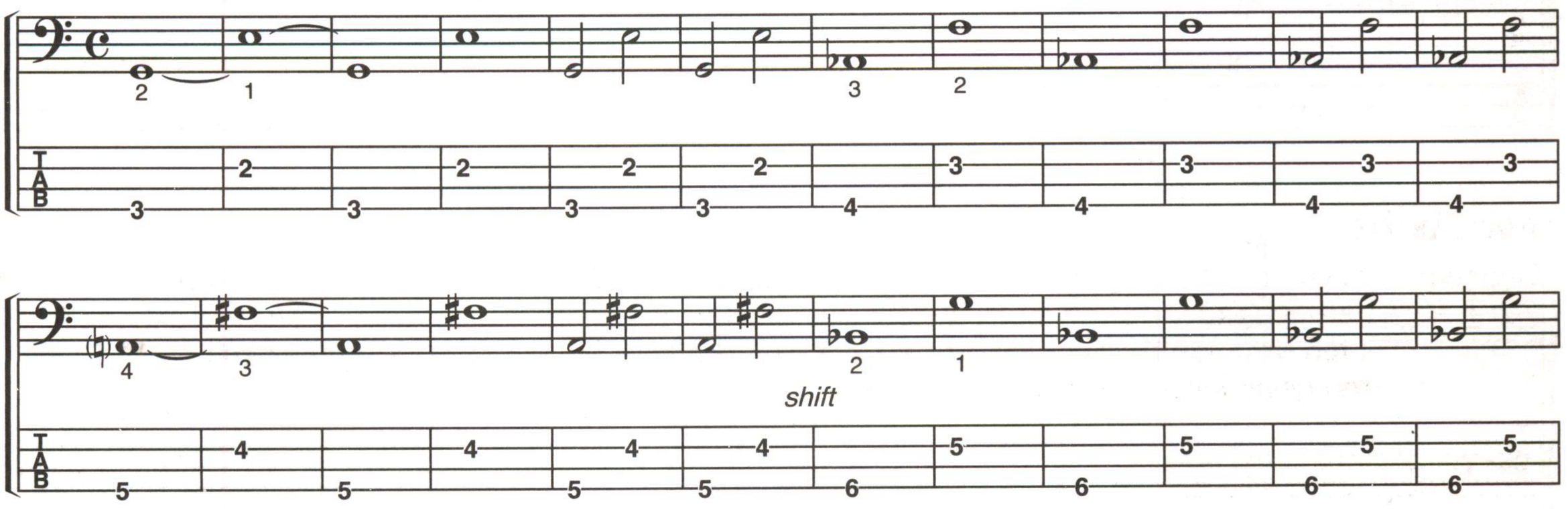


Unit 5: Sixths

We have covered octaves, fifths, tenths, and thirds. Although I have thrown in a few sixths, we have not studied them. Here we go.

Exercise 1: This is a hard one, so make sure your 4-3 is accurate. Continue up the neck, and cross over to the A and G strings eventually. Remember: if you have a chance to check intonation with open strings, do so!

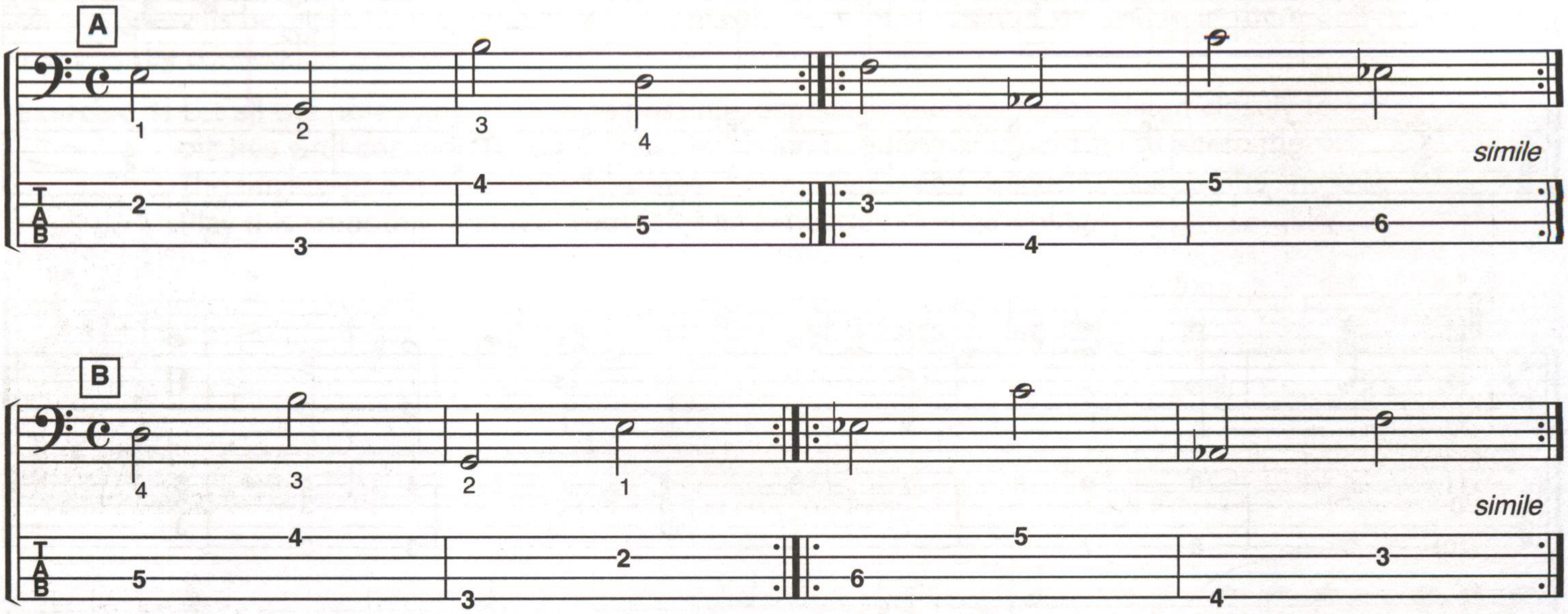




Exercise 2: Play this one very slowly and listen. Let all the notes ring. Make your adjustments without disturbing your other fingers. Listen closely, and train your ear to recognize which intervals are out of tune.

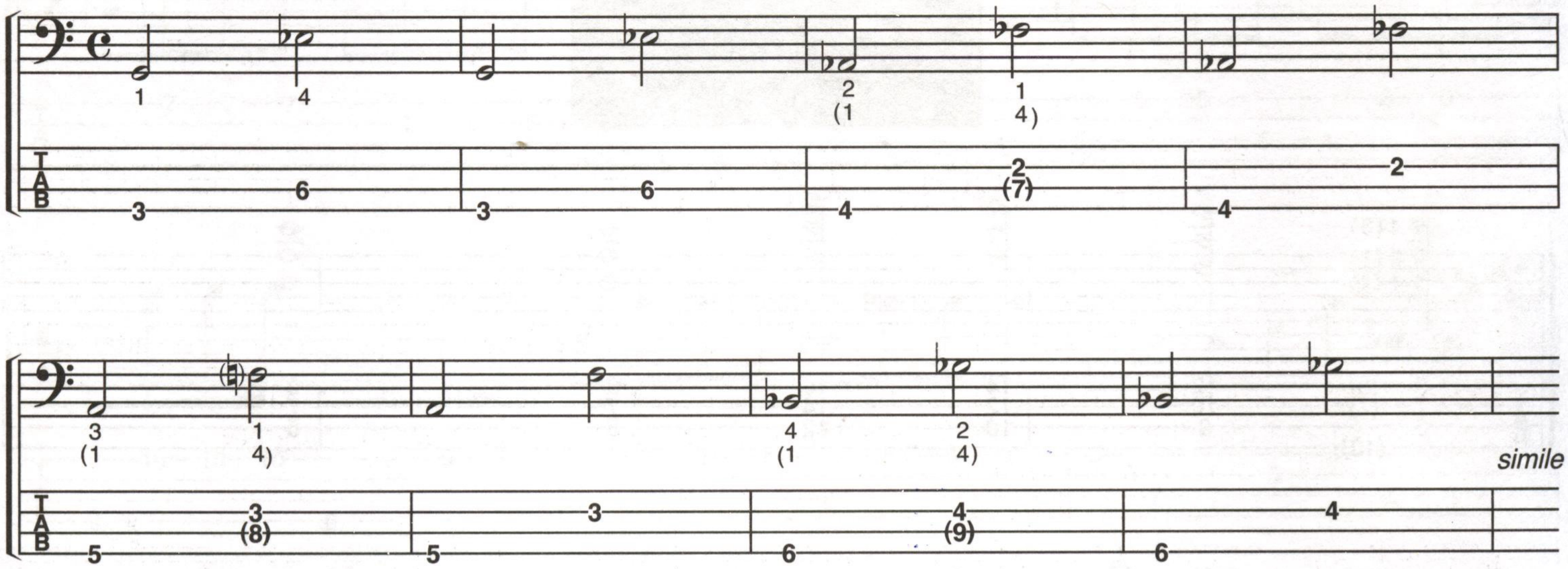
Exercise 3: Keep fingers down. This is like a "hazard" exercise, with shift. Refer to *Rock Bass*, Unit 2, for hazard exercises.

VARIATIONS



Minor Sixths

Exercise 4: As you can see, all the intervals are beginning to relate (in other words, inverted thirds become sixths, fifths become fourths, etc.). Soon, we will start combining all the intervals in the practical examples. Try to use as many different fingerings as possible. You never know when you might get stuck.



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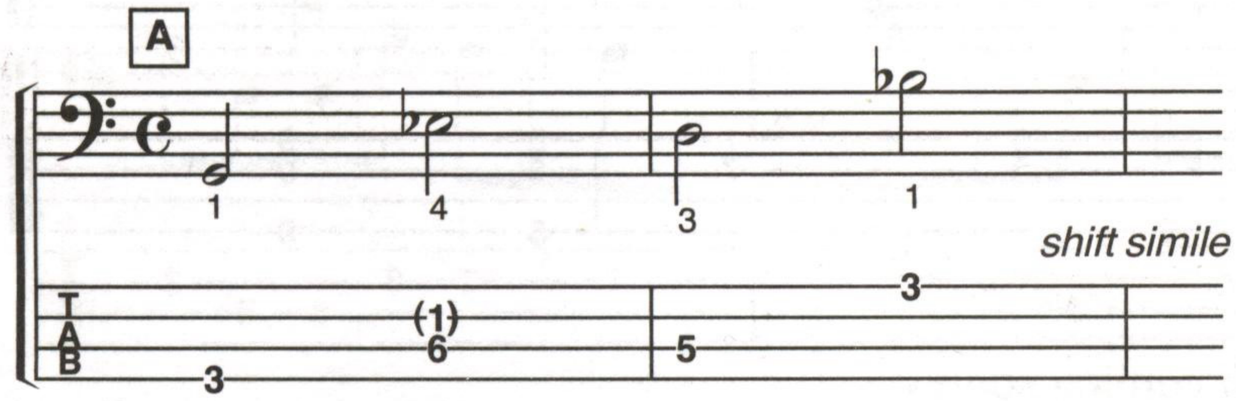
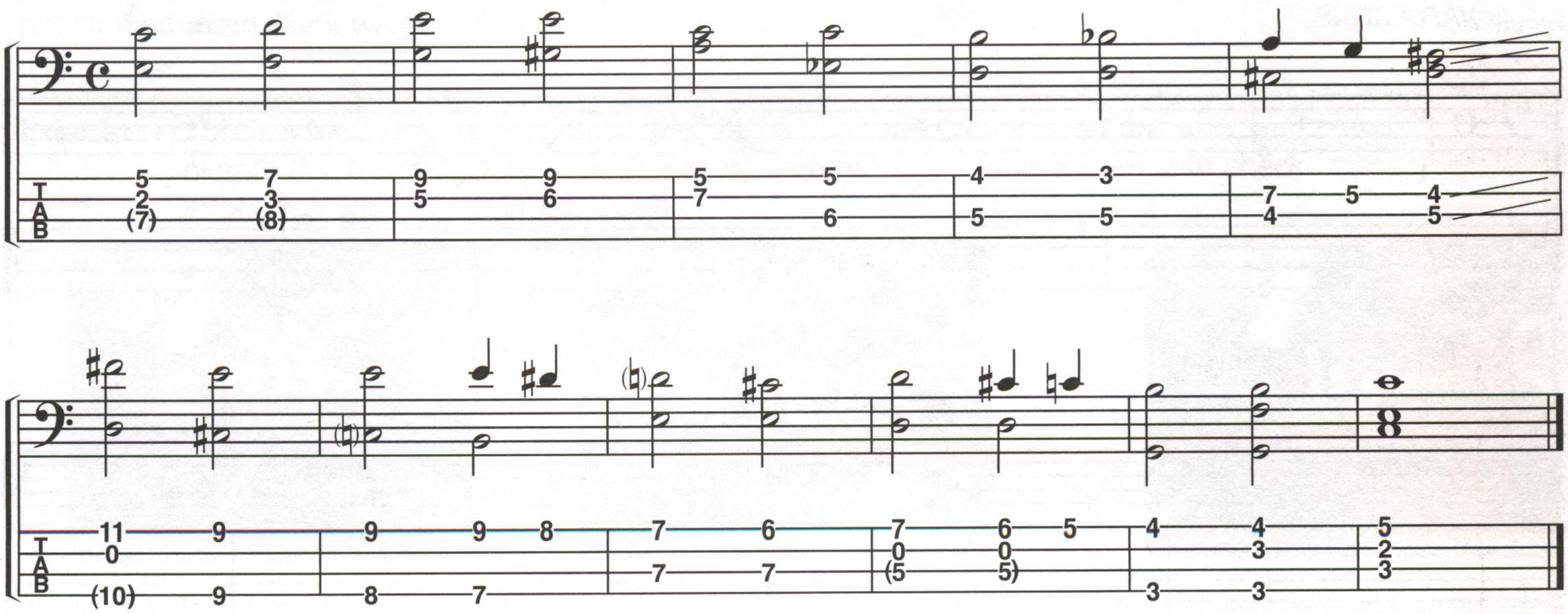
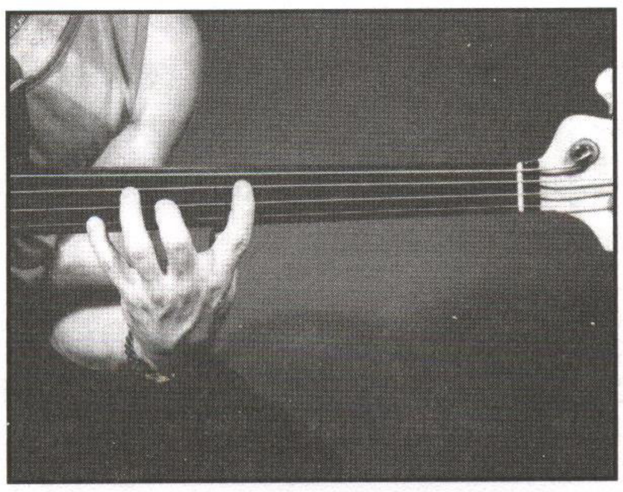
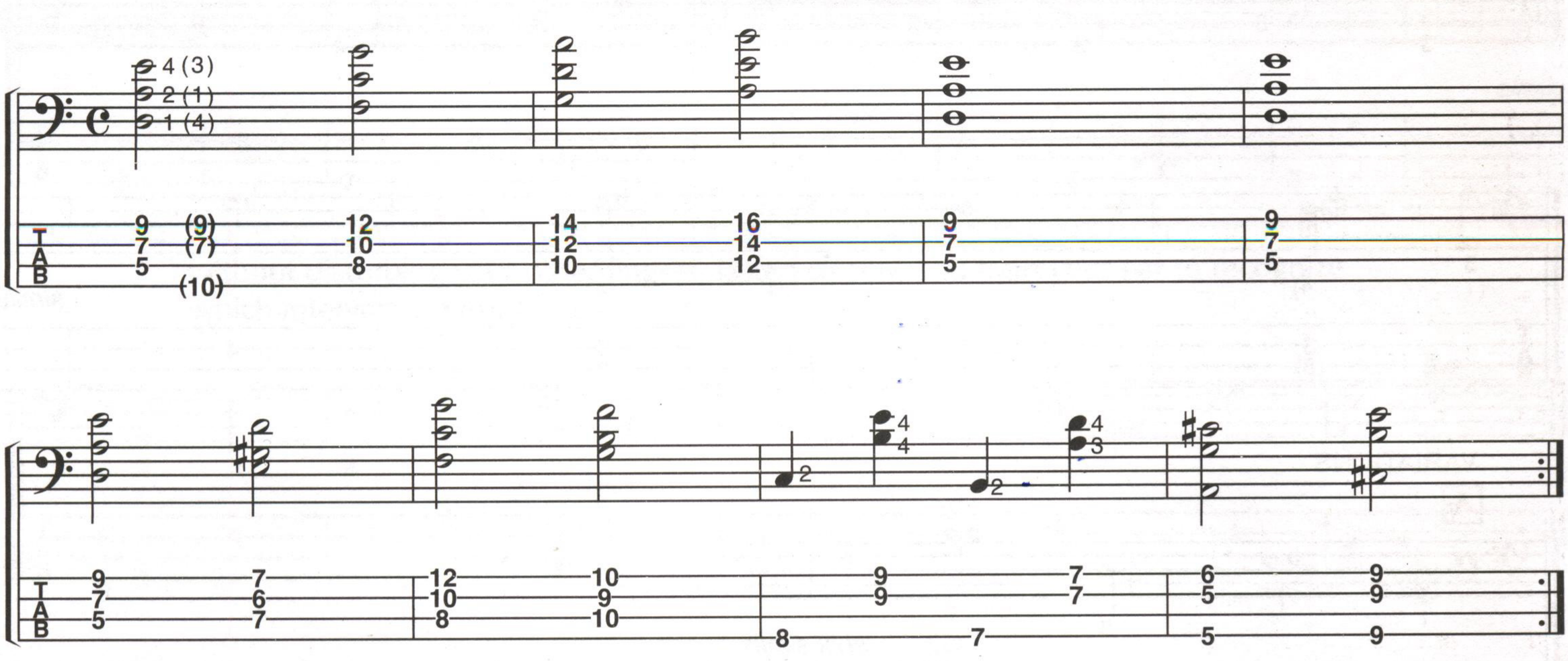


Exercise 5: Check your tuning at every opportunity. Figure out a practical fingering and write it in. Then figure out another one. Make music out of this one.



Exercise 6: Just for kicks, try this. Stacking fifths provides ample opportunity for intonation disasters, but when they are right, they really sound lush, so stretch!



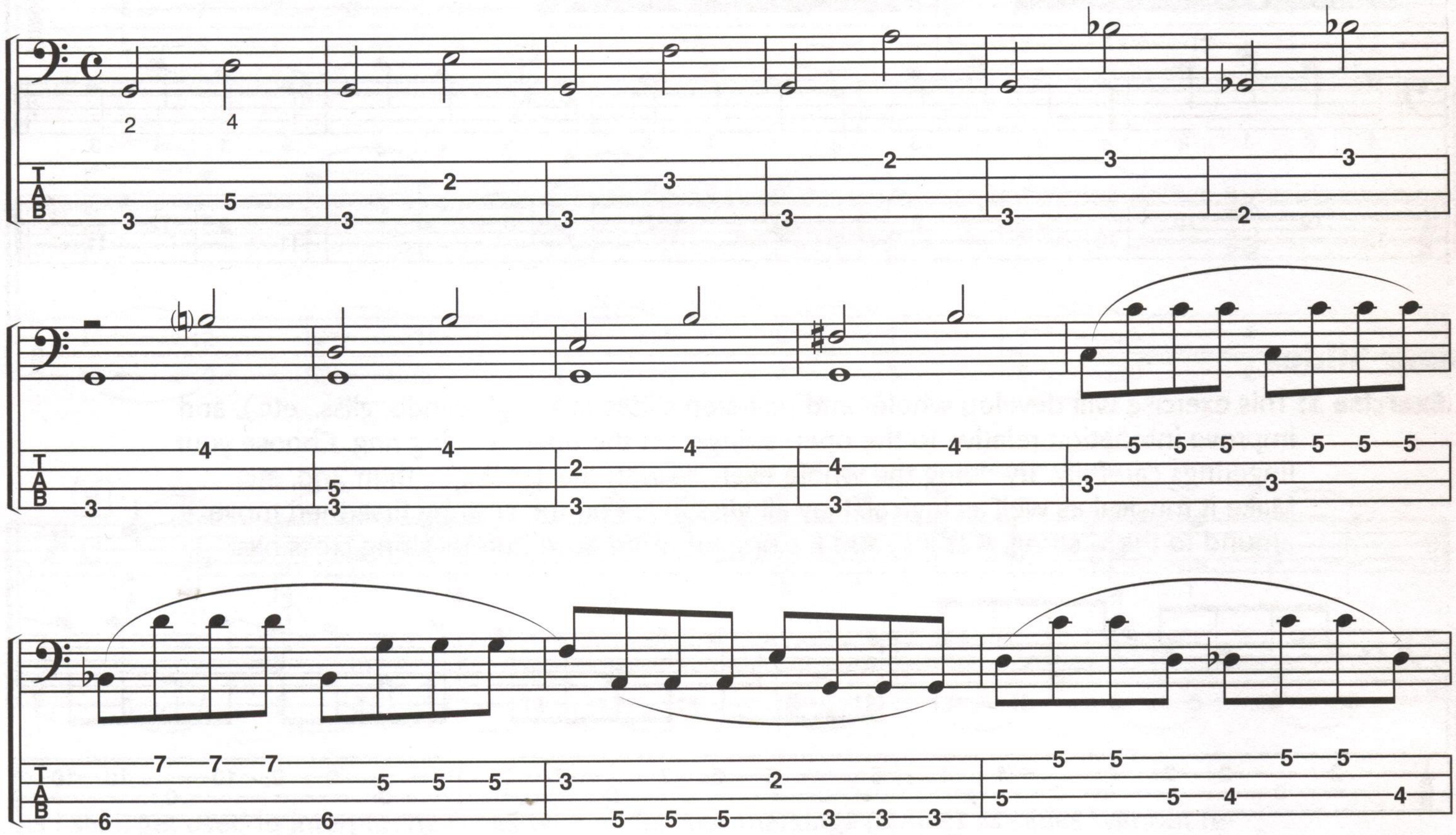


Special effects, slides, harmonics, and more fun stuff coming soon.

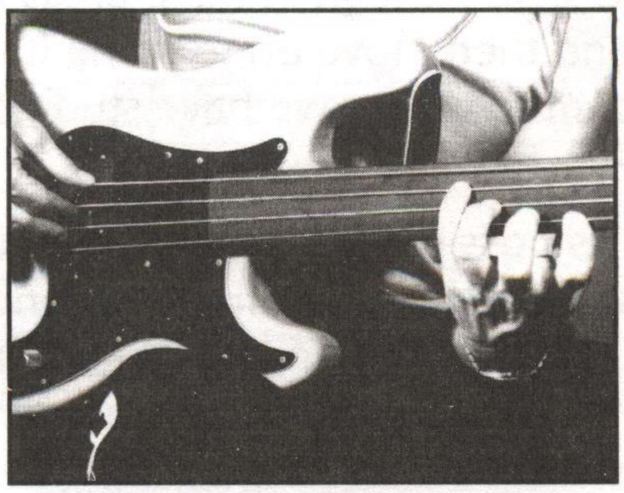
Unit 6: Triads

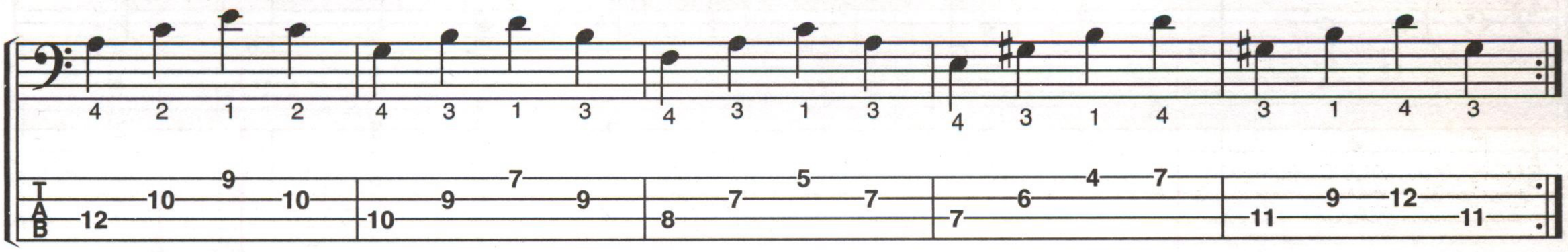
At this point, your relative pitch should be solid enough in most areas of the instrument. Let's review all the intervals we've been over and then move on to some fun stuff! We have omitted certain intervals because they are equivalent to others we have studied or we will hear them better in a chordal context.

Exercise 1: Let all the notes ring as long as possible, especially the low notes. Listen closely to pitches, and concentrate on fingers (left-hand fingering and right-hand alternation) The fingerings are up to you; just make them logical and practical. Make shifts smooth. Play this smoothly, and feel your left-hand muscles strengthening.



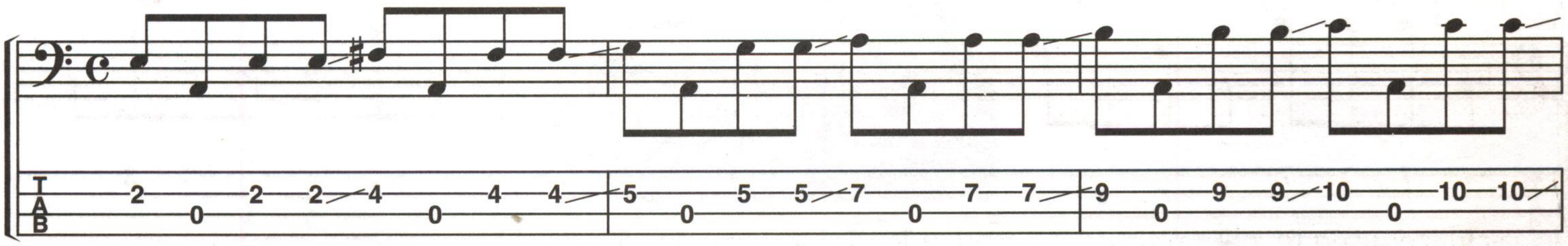
Exercise 2: Triad intonation. Let all notes ring to form a chord. Play them extremely legato, and make sure your shifts are smooth.

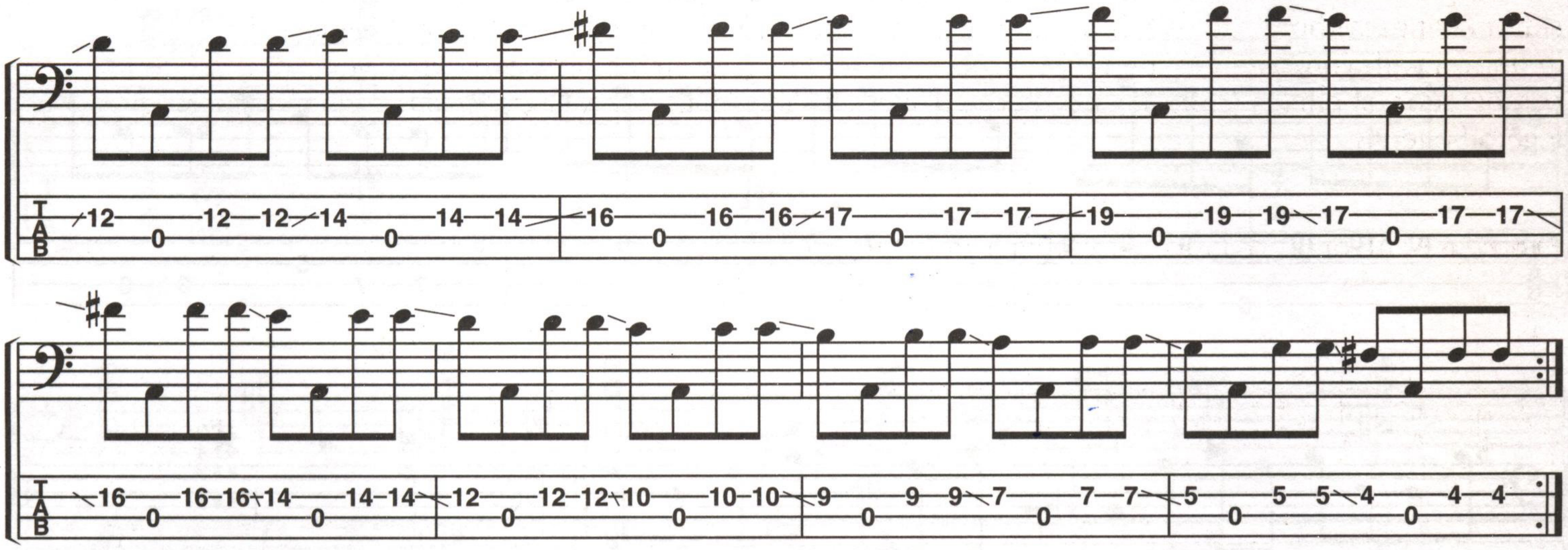




Linear Slides

Exercise 3: This exercise will develop whole- and half-step slides (a.k.a. glissando, gliss., etc.), and improve intonation relative to the open strings. Let the open A string ring. Choose your fingerings carefully. Try doing the whole exercise with the 1st finger, then 2nd, etc. Make it musical as well as logical. Play all glissandos on the D string first, then move around to the G string, A string, and E string for more adventurous string crossings.

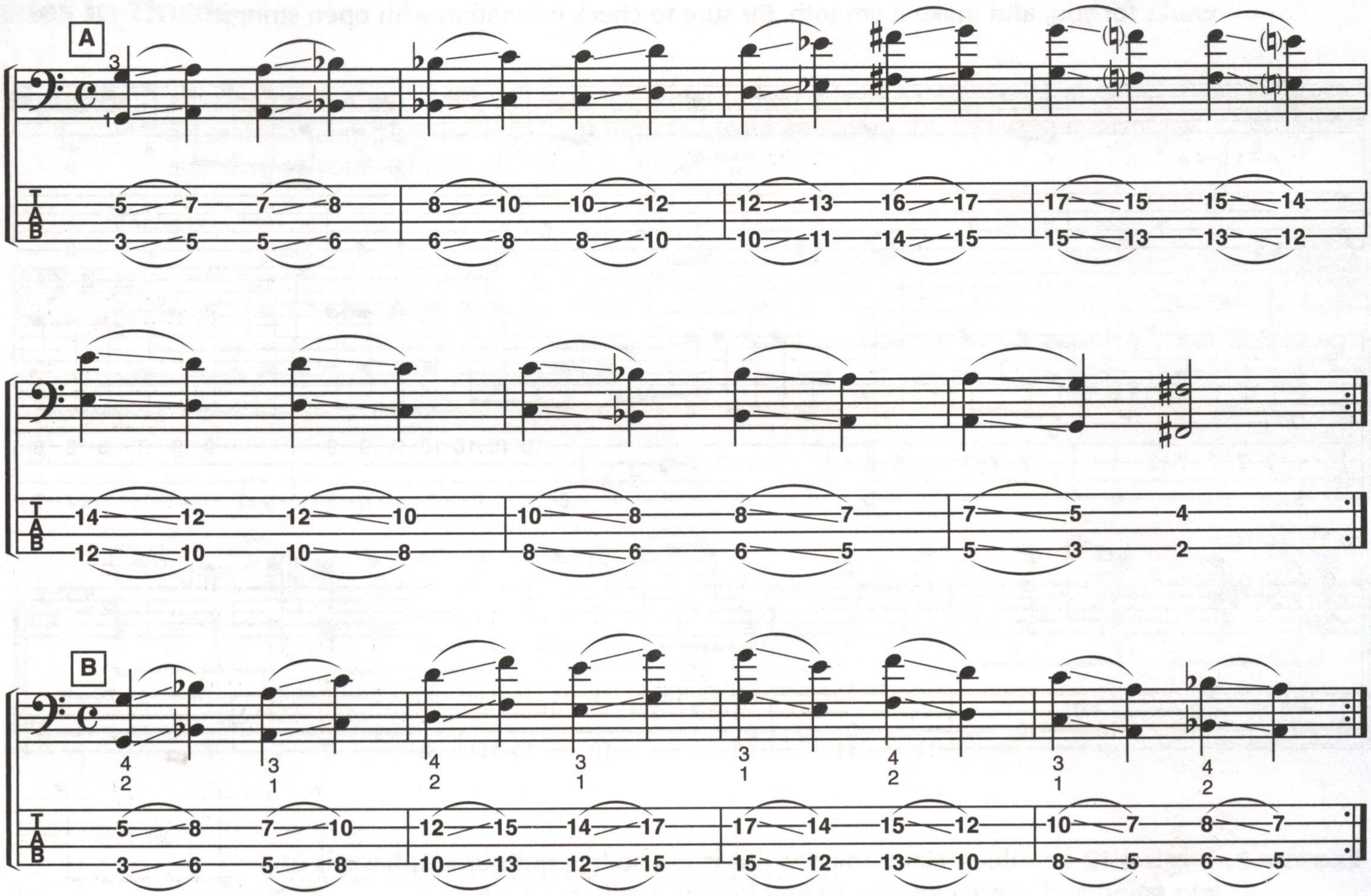




Start slowly and speed up gradually.

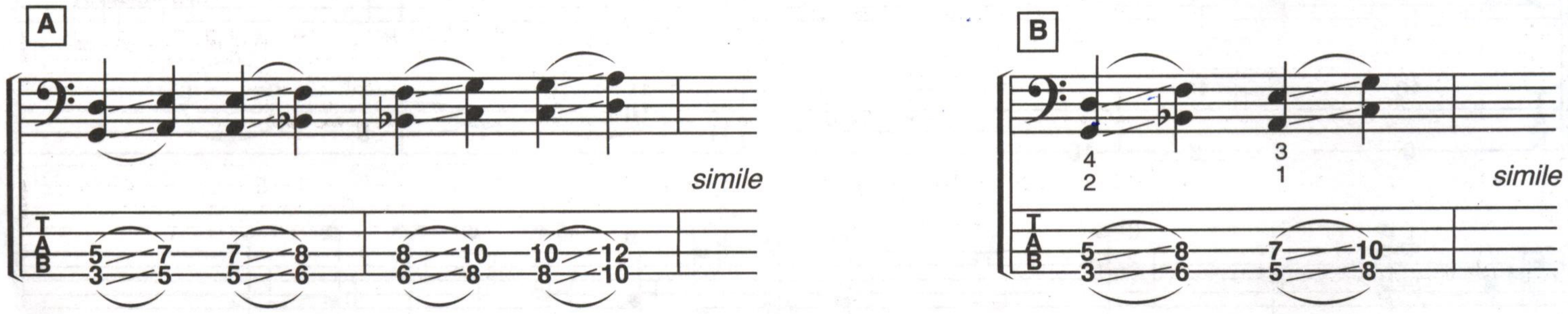
Slides and glissandos are usually notated with a straight line between the notes, as seen above. It is also very common for them to be notated with slur markings added (curved lines between notes (♩♩.). Slides without slur markings generally mean the second note is re-attacked. Slides with slur markings mean the second note is not re-attacked. Get used to seeing and playing it both ways. Don't exaggerate

Exercise 4: Practice this exercise until it's very smooth and quick. It is to be played on the E and D strings. Use all four left-hand fingers at various points (one repeat using your 1st and 3rd finger,one repeat using your 2nd and 4th finger, etc.). Then mix them up. Practice this one in different keys after you get the fingering down.



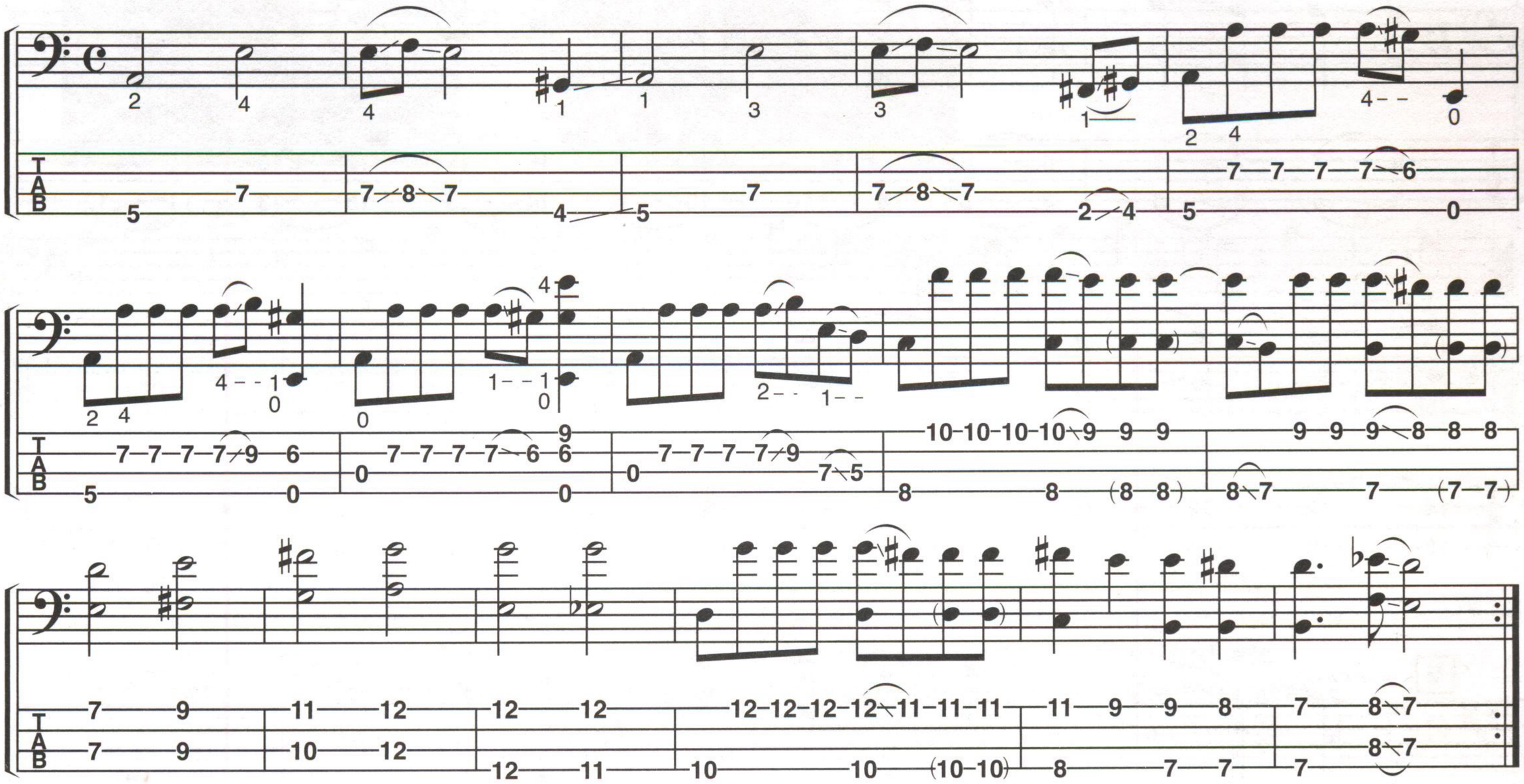
As I said, get used to interpreting sildes with added slur markings (above) as slides without re-attacking the right hand. For example, you might get asked to play a written melody that has slur markings without slides. It is up to you to make it musical. If another instrument is playing in unison with you, listen to the way it is phrased, and try to match it. This could involve a combination of effects (slurs, legato, staccato, etc.). If slides sound too "slick," revert back to a good legato fingering.

Exercise 5: All of these work with fifths also.

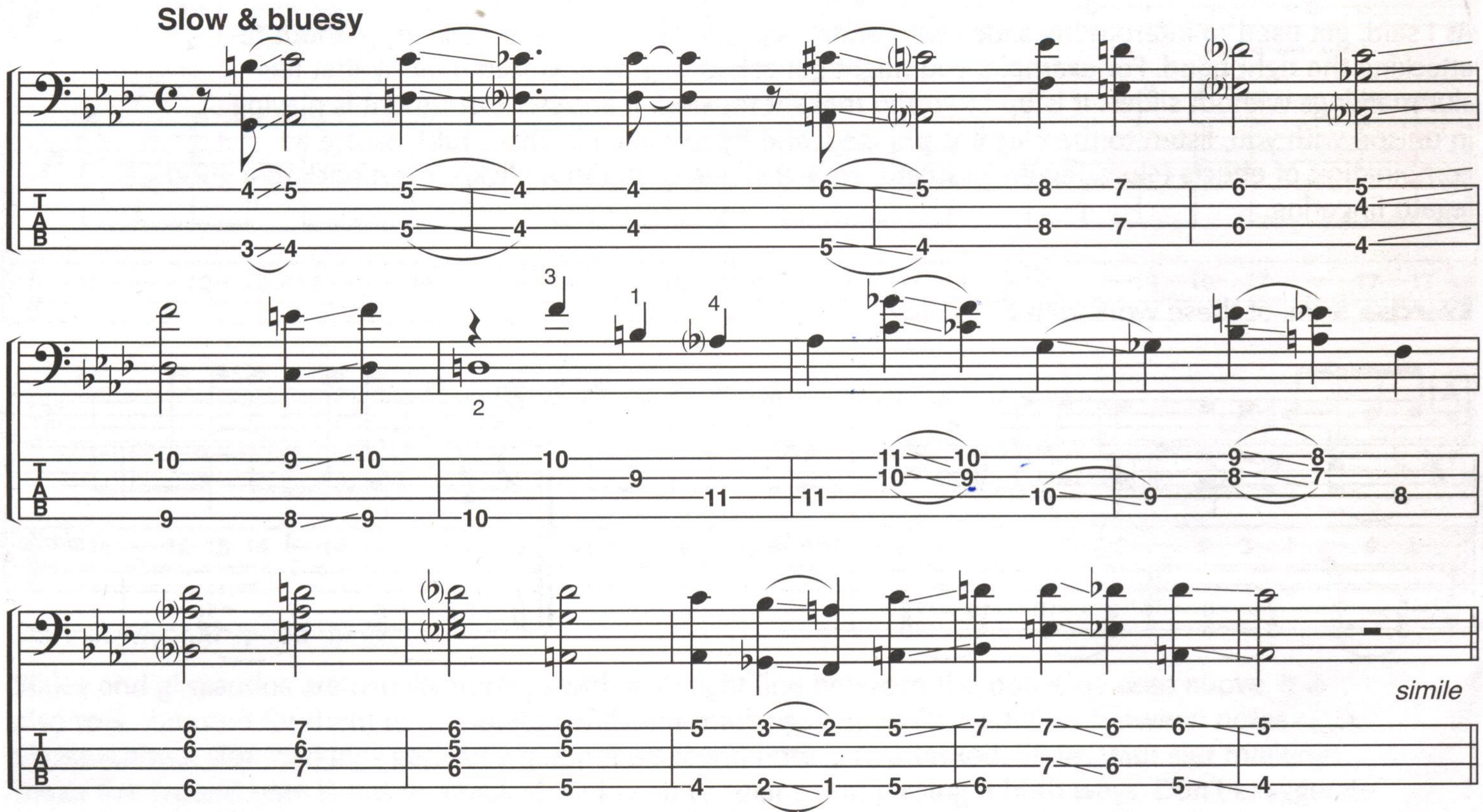


Unit 7: Advanced Exercises

Exercise 1: Let's dig right into some rather complex fingering intonation studies. Practice them slowly and really listen. We'll throw in some slides and effects, like what we have already studied. Try to let all notes ring as long as possible. Discover a fingering that works for you, and make it smooth. Be sure to check intonation with open strings.



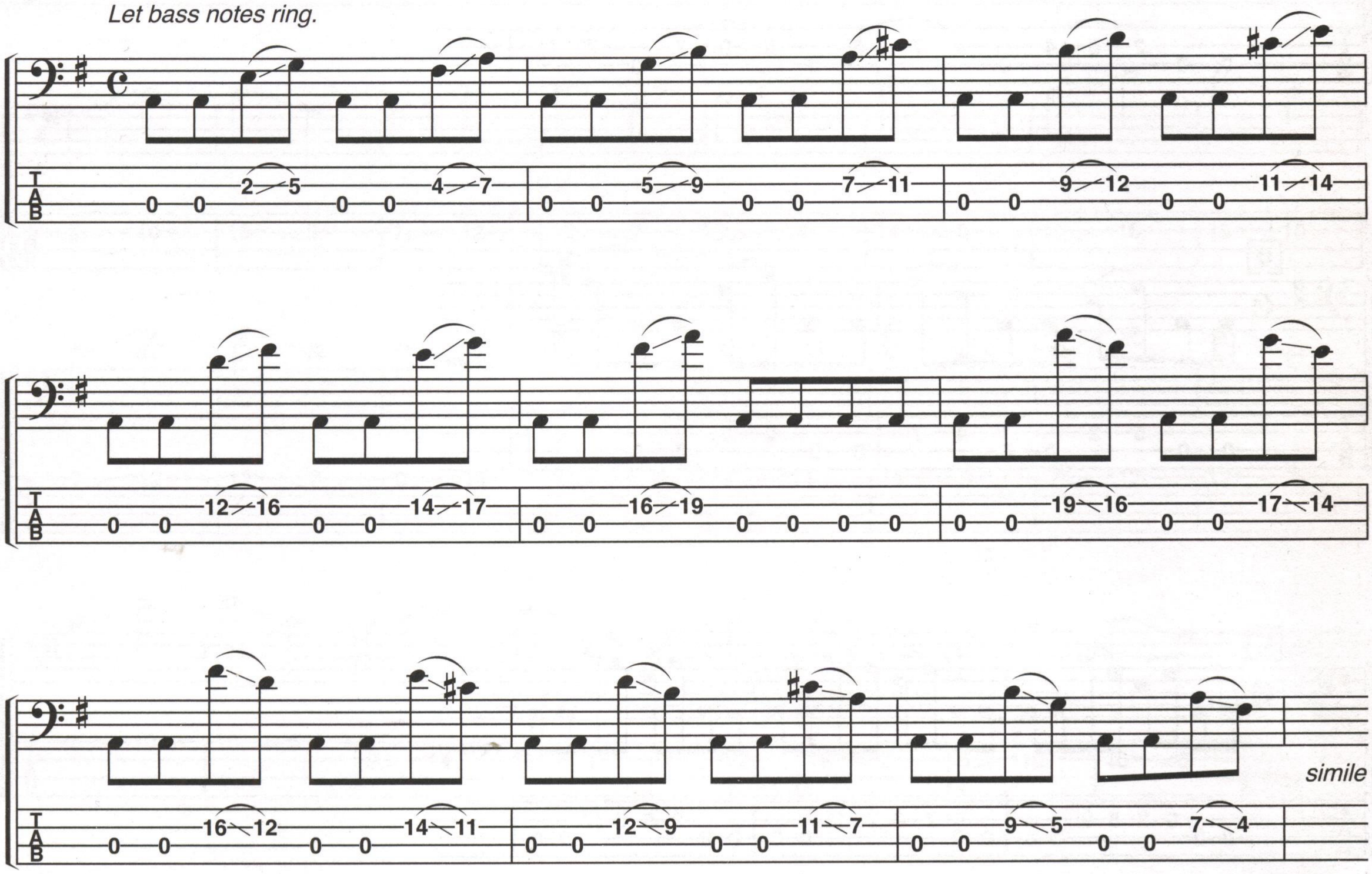
Exercise 2: This is a 12-bar blues. Harmonically, this is not so hip, but our emphasis is on intonation and special effects. So feel free to "hip it up" a bit.



At this point, you should be able to pick a set of chord changes and voice them on your fretless, paying particular attention to intonation and logical fingering. (For tenths and chordal voicings, refer to the *Rock Bass* book.)

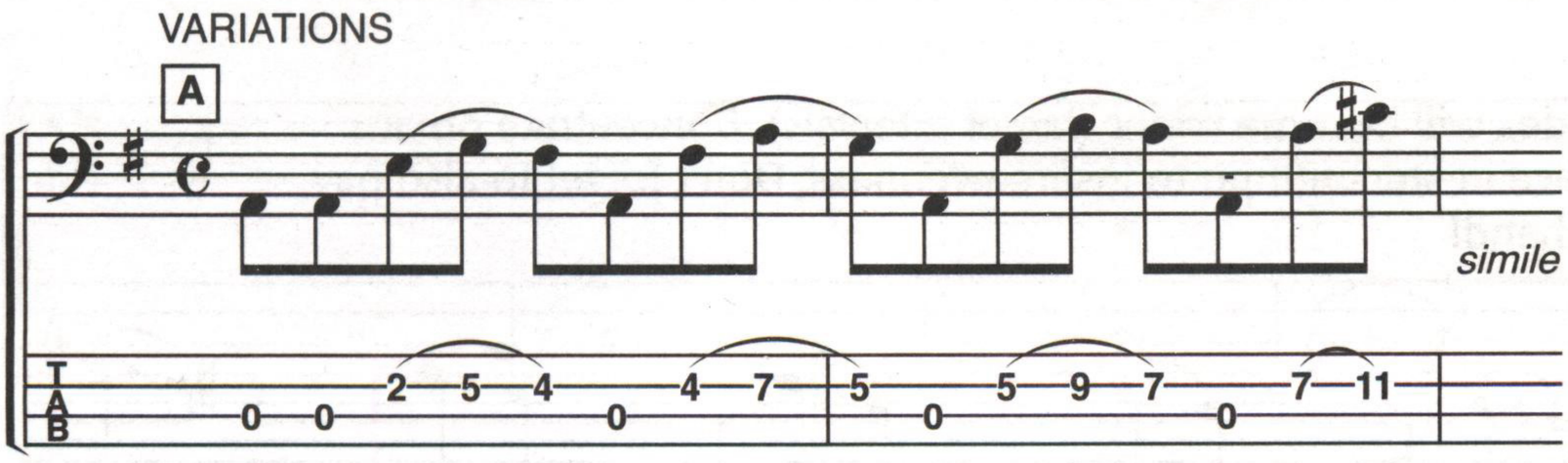
Slides in Thirds

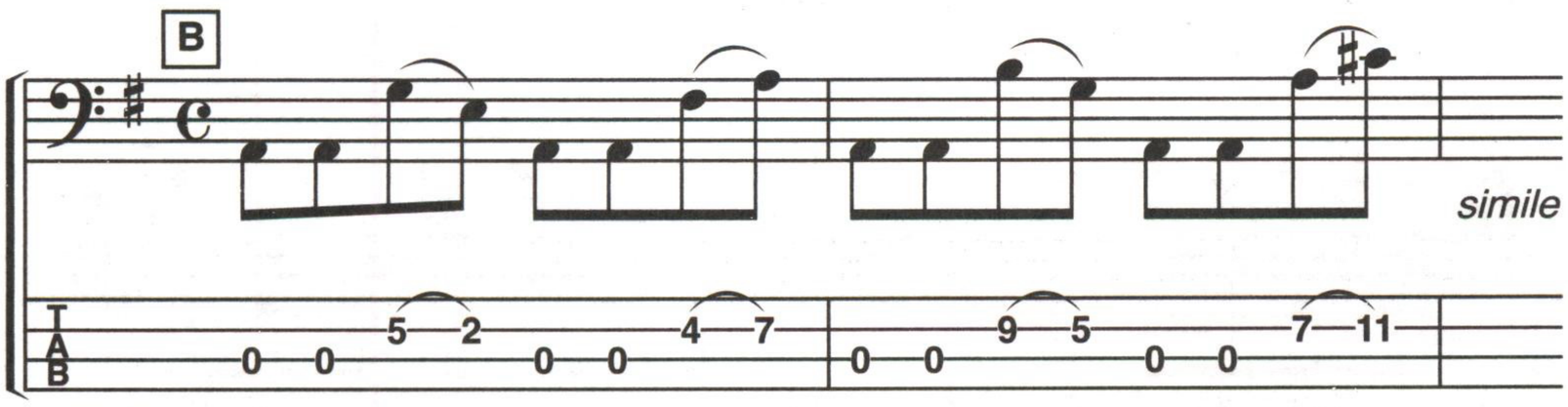
Exercise 3: As we progress, the slides will become wider (larger intervals). Concentrate on an accurate landing. Practice in strict tempo to insure evenness. Don't forget to also pay attention to your right hand!

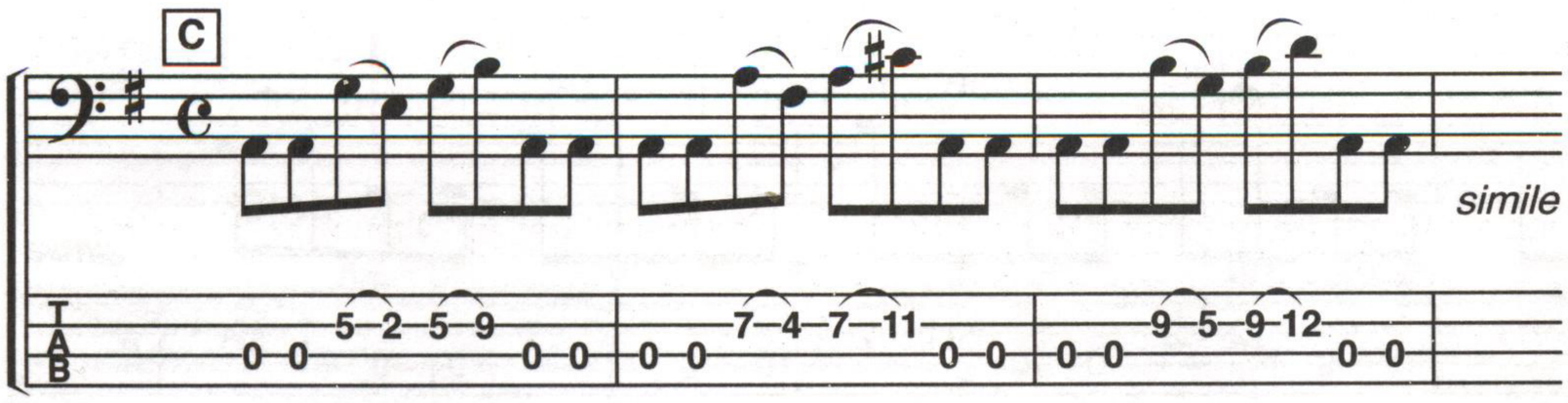


Play all the A's open, and use the open string as your intonation reference. Play from top to bottom, then transpose using the E and D strings.

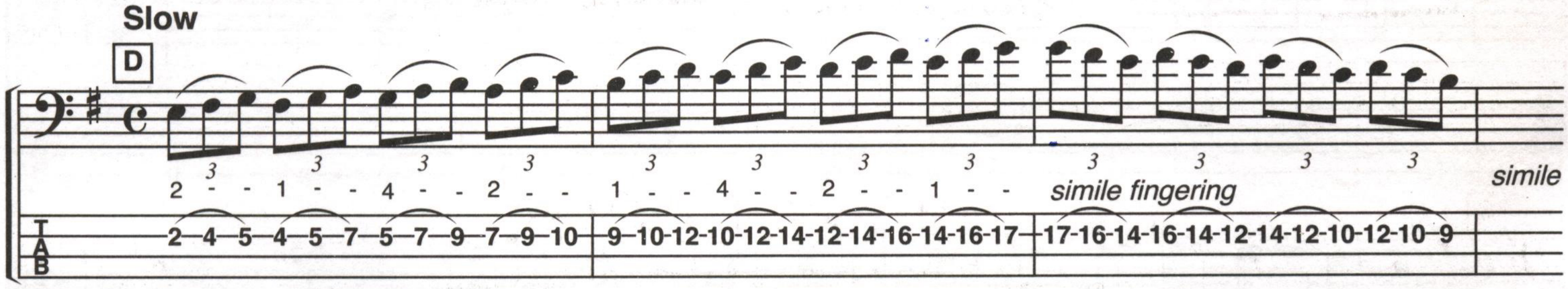
Exercise 4: There are many fingering possibilities. Just make sure you use all of them. There will be patterns later that require all your fingers, including more exotic fingerings. "Exotic" refers to fingerings that might appear awkward or unnatural, but are crucial to facilitate a certain musical passage.







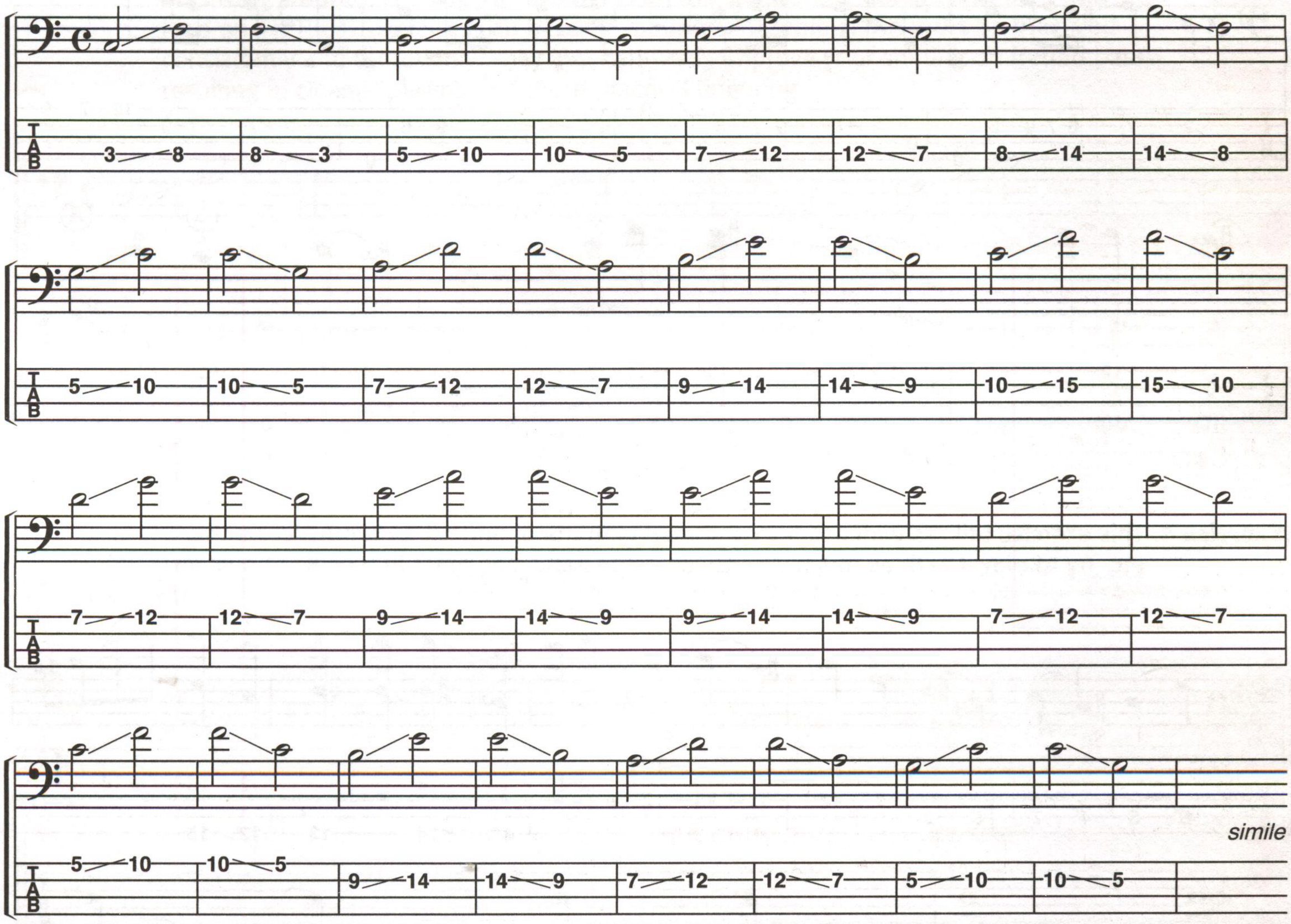
Each group of triplets should be played with one finger. The fingering below is a good place to start. Make it smooth getting from 1 to 4.



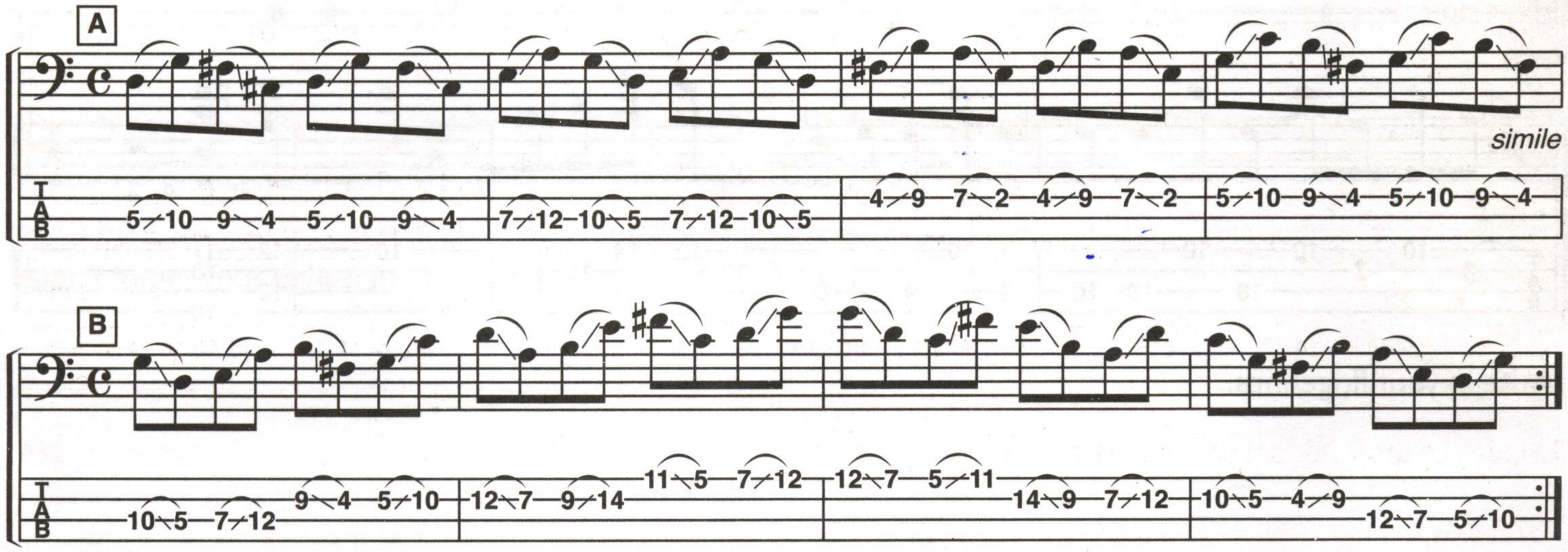
Fingerings are optional so long as execution is smooth.

Unit 8: Slides of a Fourth

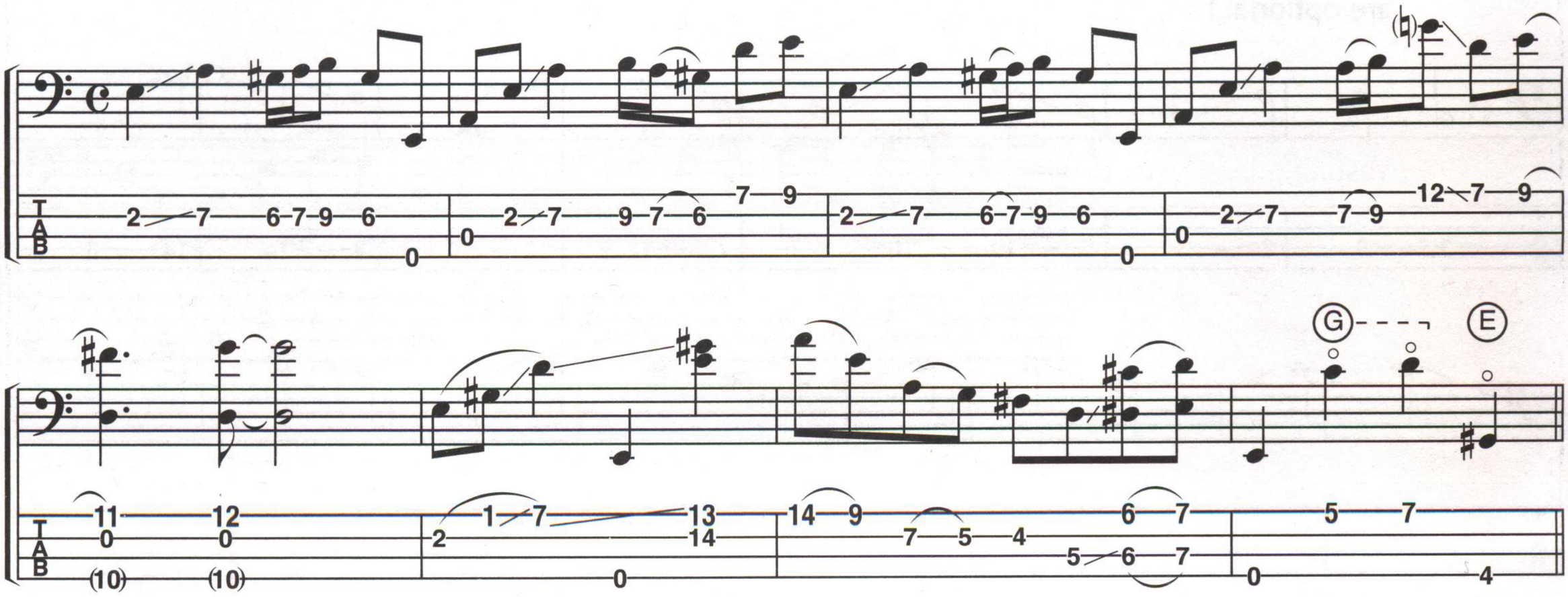
Exercise 1: Once again, start on various fingers. Practice slowly and make slides smooth and deliberate. Move this exercise around to different strings. (Slides between whole steps are optional.)



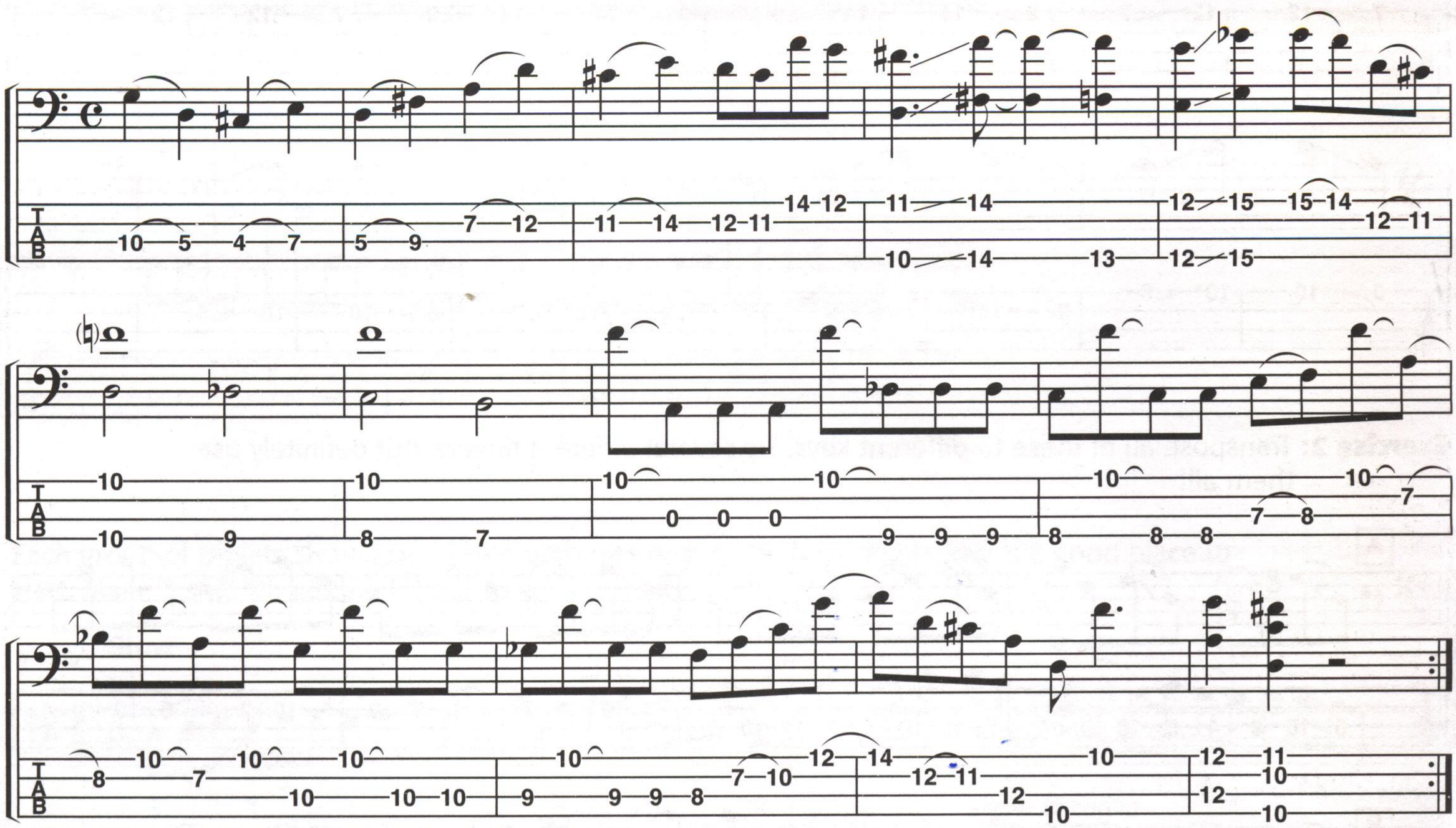
Exercise 2: Transpose all of these to different keys. Try several different fingers, but definitely use them all!



Exercise 3: If you must, practice these in two-bar phrases. Get each two-bar phrase solid, and put them together. Rely on your ear, not your eyes. Pay extremely close attention to the slides and their subtle changes. Make it sound musical and melodic.



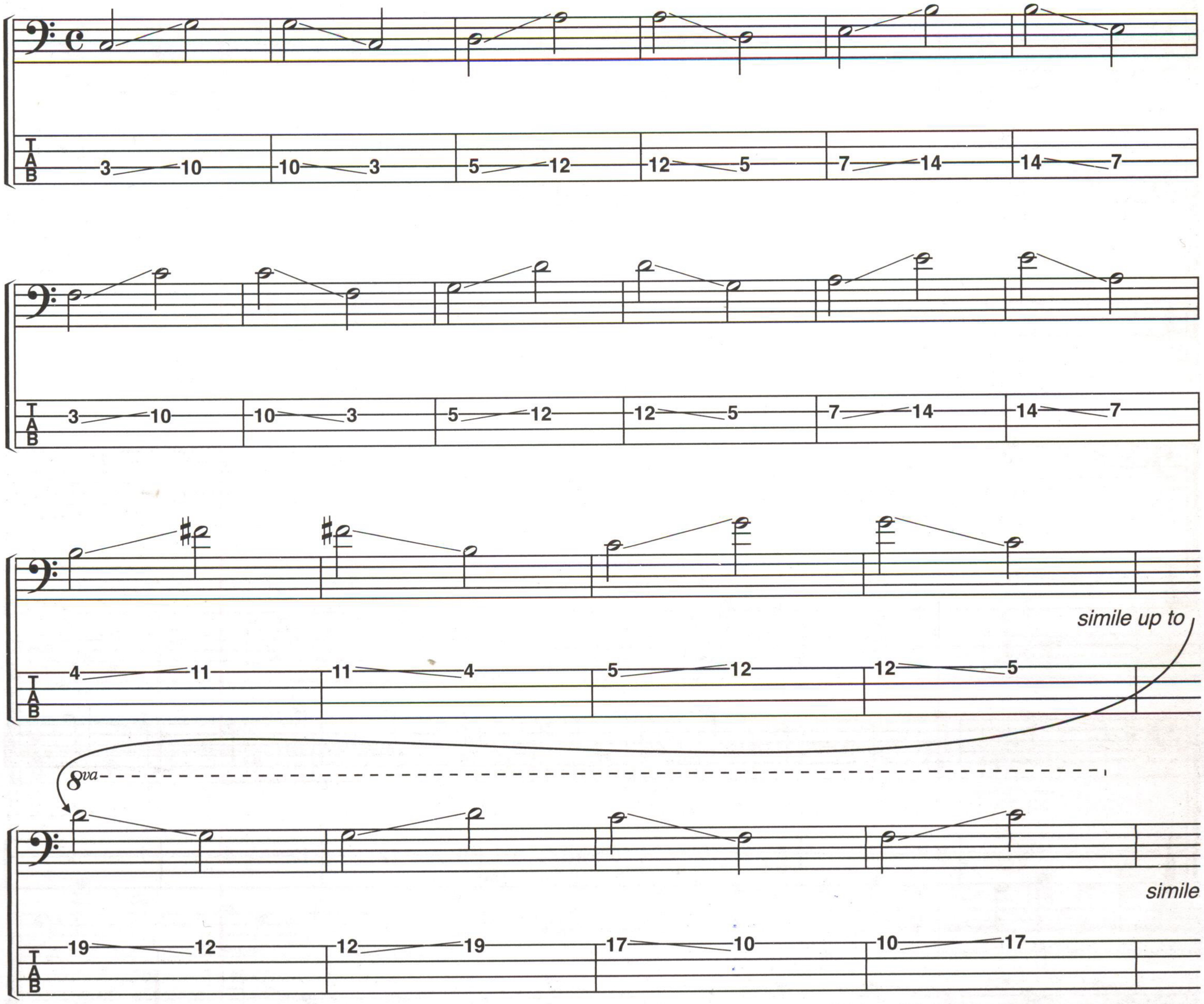
Exercise 4: This exercise utilizes wider slides combined with major and minor tenths, sevenths, etc. Try to play it with as much expression as possible. Let all F's in bars 8–11 sustain.



Write in your fingerings.

Unit 9: Slides of a Fifth, Sixth, Seventh, and Octave

Exercise 1: Switch strings when you must. Each time you practice, use a different fingering (in other words, 1st, then 2nd, etc.). Listen with your ears, not your eyes. If you are extremely smooth, you can switch fingers on the slide, going down (start on 3 and land on 1). These exercises can become laborious or tedious but must be practiced consistently and thoroughly. They also can vastly improve your shifting on fretted bass, resulting in cleaner playing and more practical fingering.

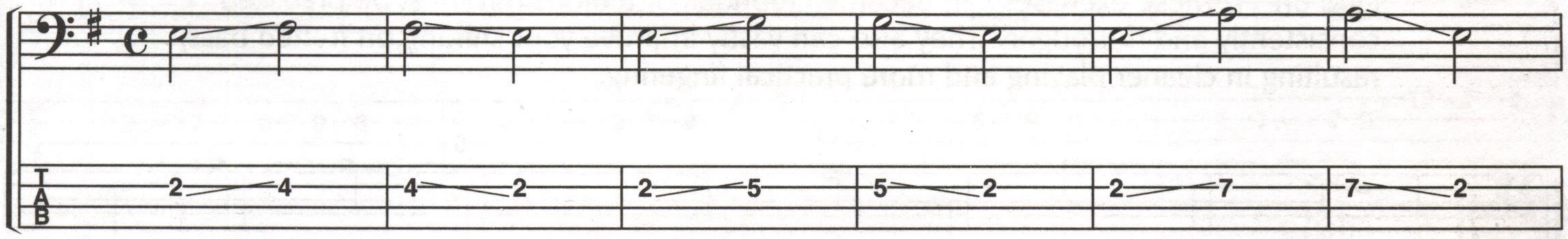


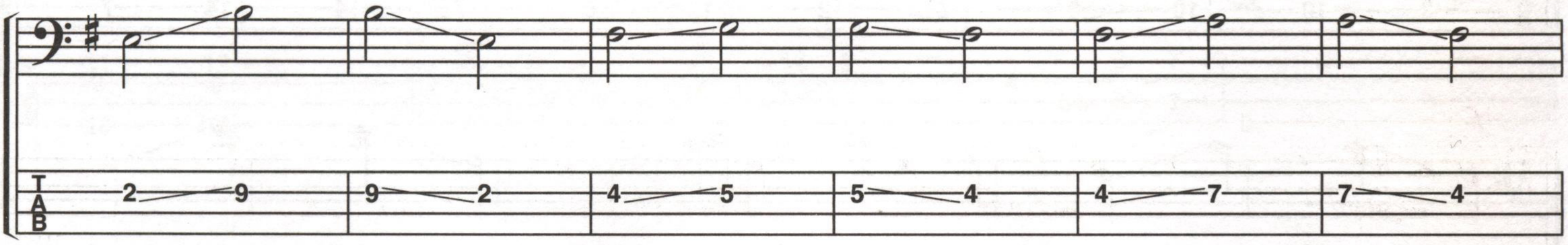
Don't forget your right-hand alternation.

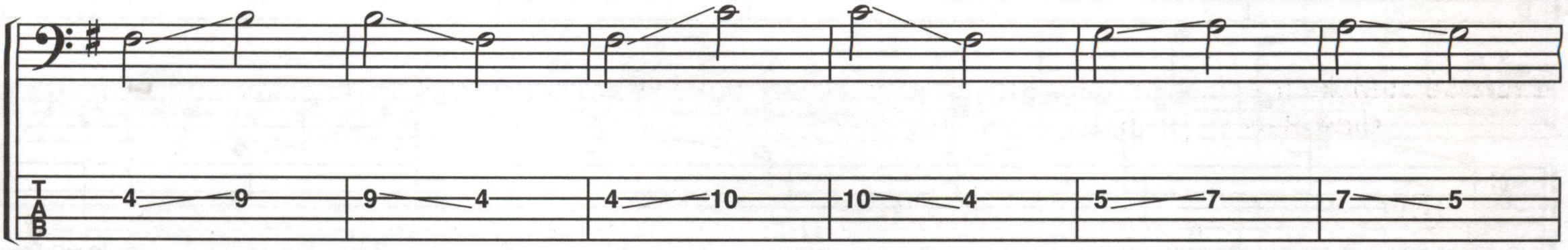
Combination of Interval Slides Covered

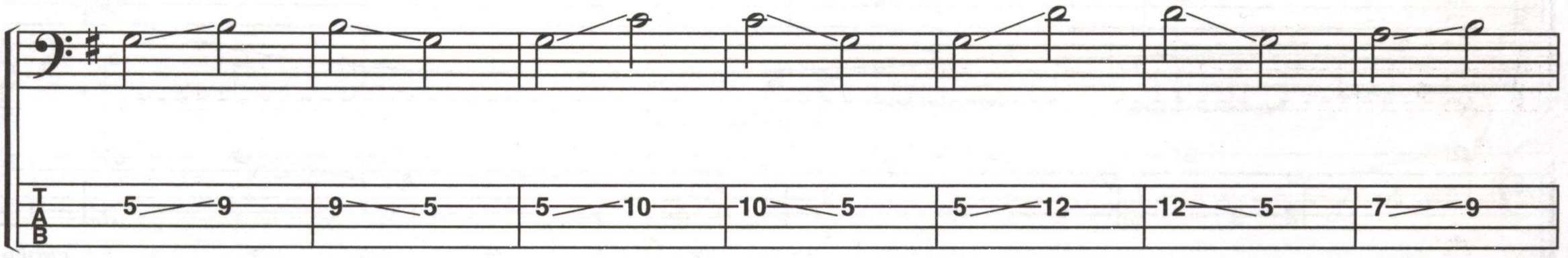
Exercise 2: By practicing these diatonically, you cover seconds, thirds, fourths, and fifths. Practice in other keys as well! You might also be able to switch fingers on the way up. This will be discussed in detail in Unit 10.

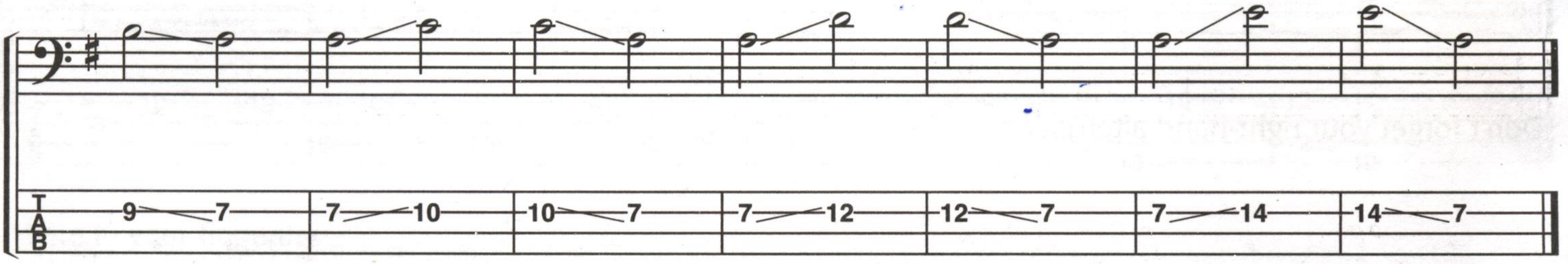
E minor





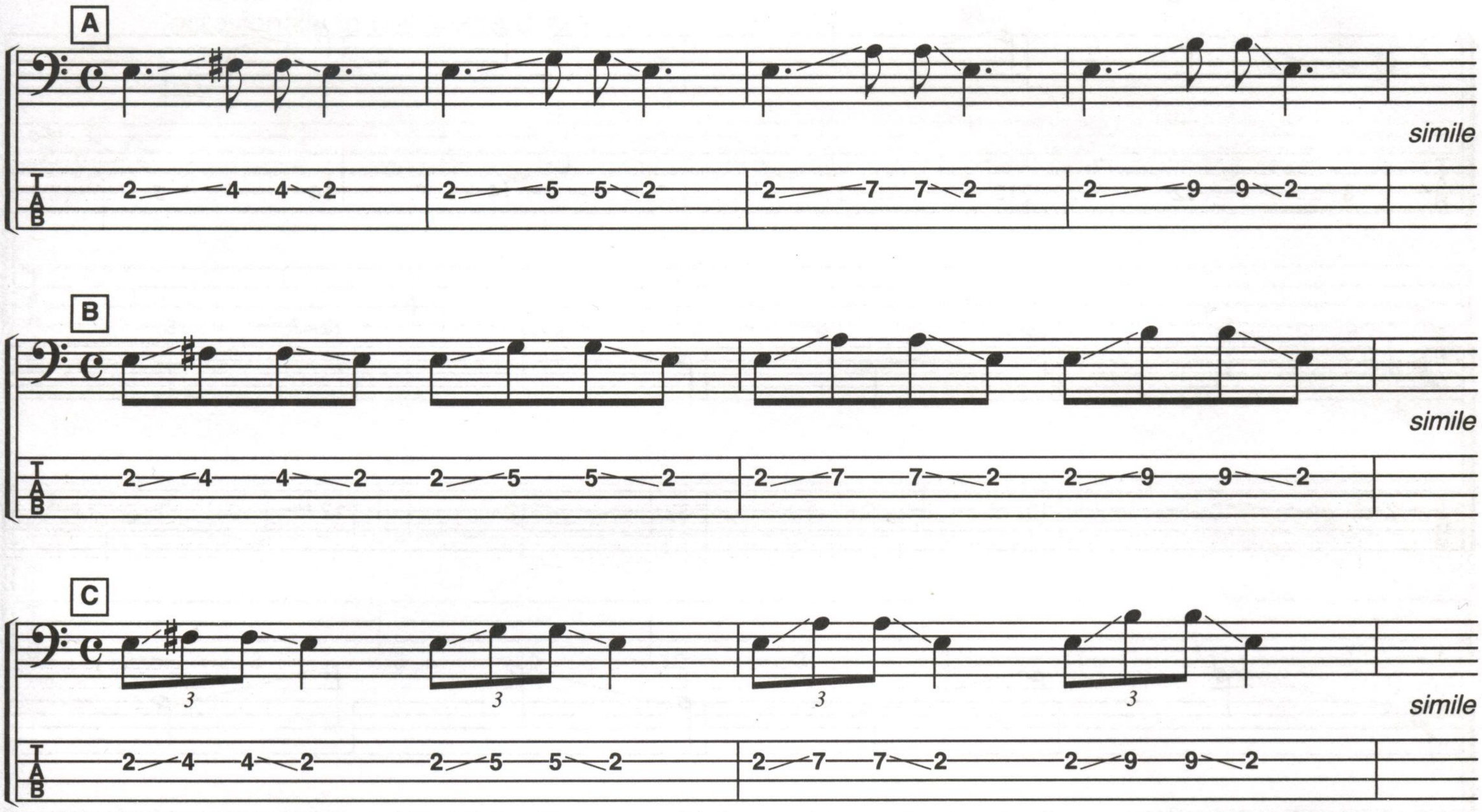




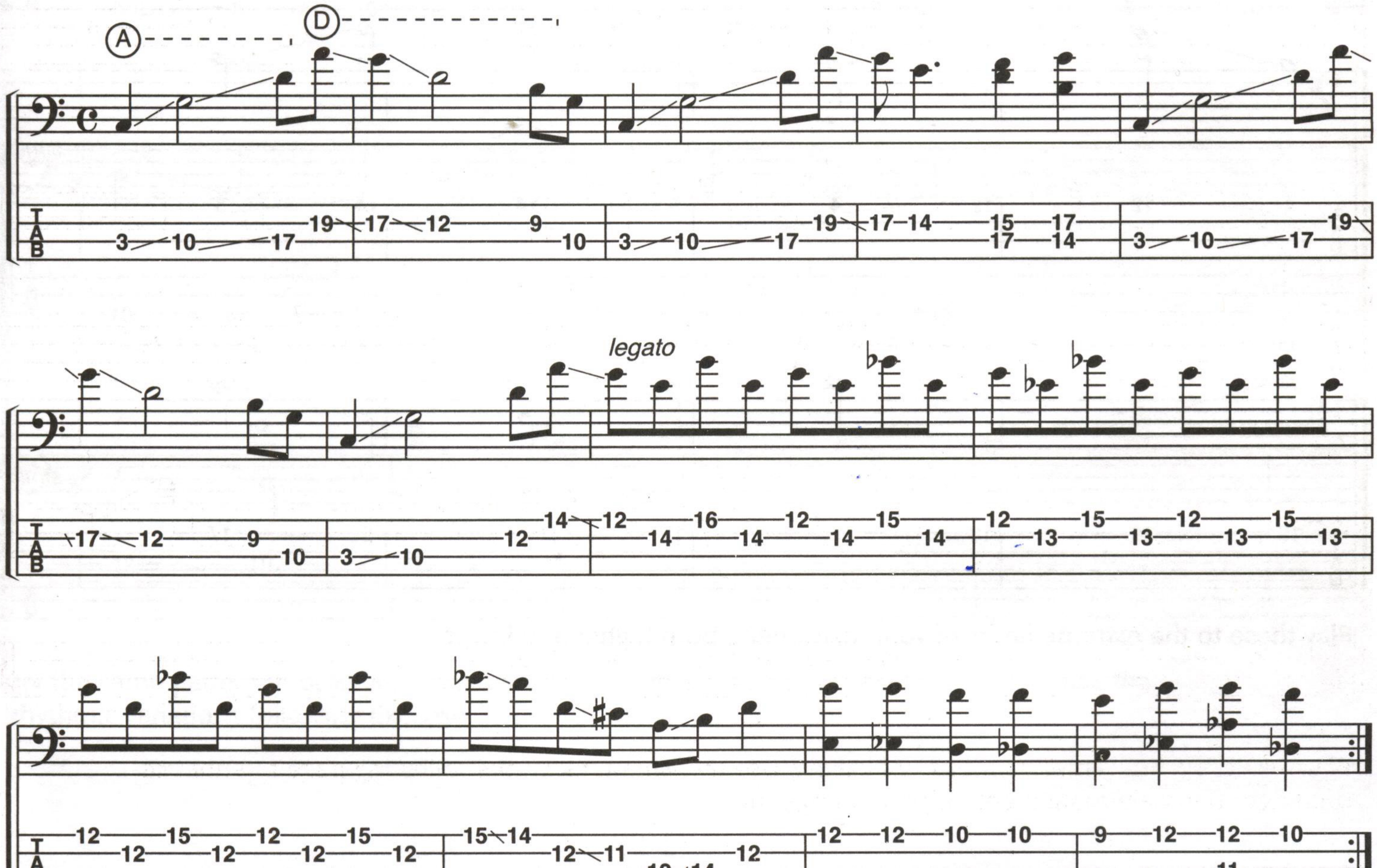


Play this to the limits that your bass will allow. Use the variations on the following page to enhance both right-hand alternation and left-hand fingering.

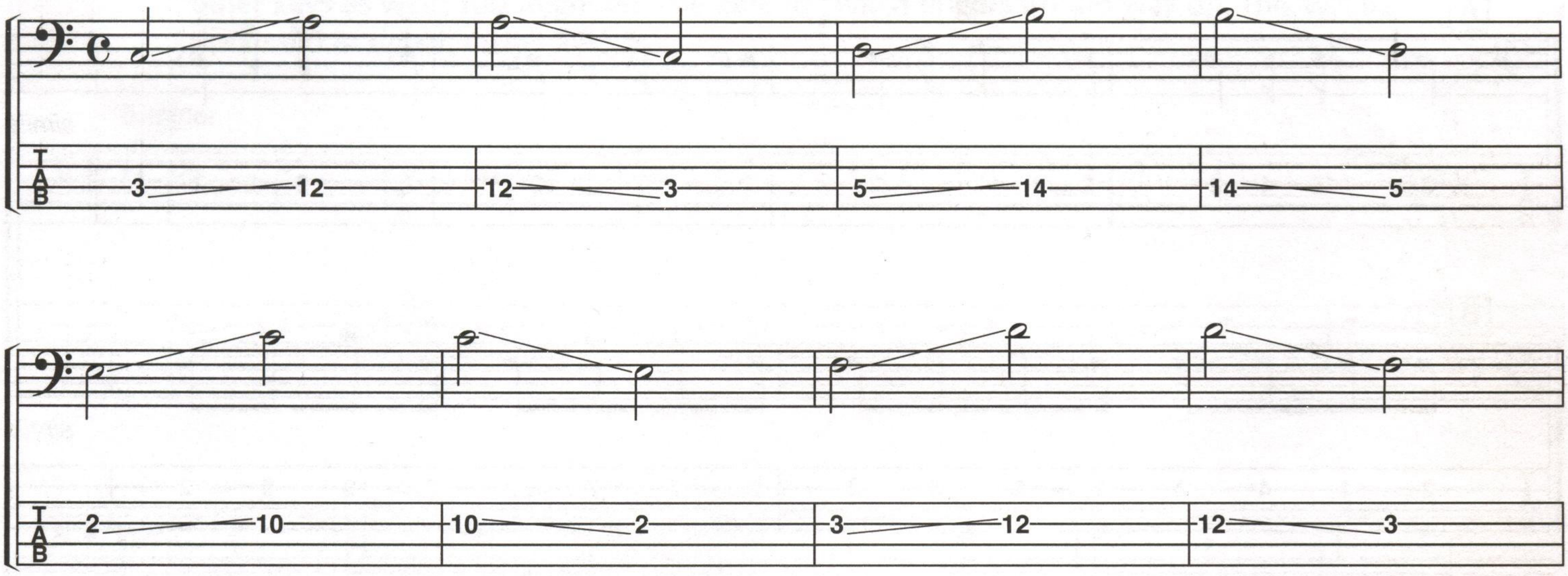
Rhythmic Variations for Exercise 2

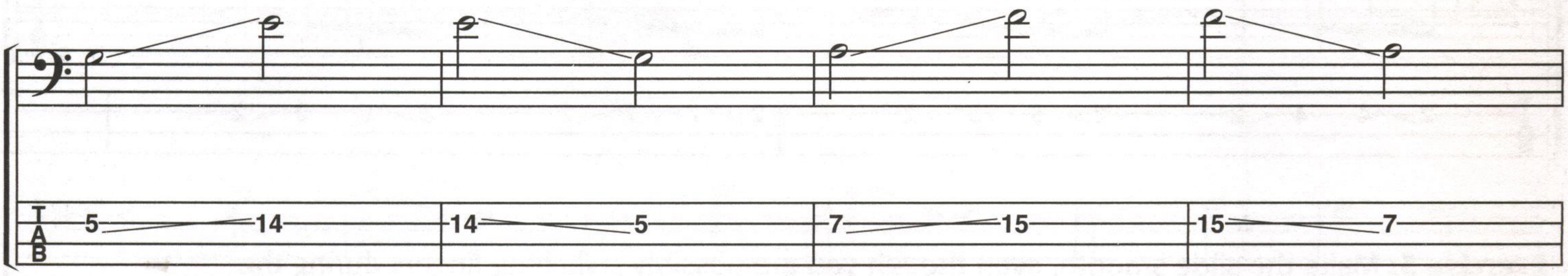


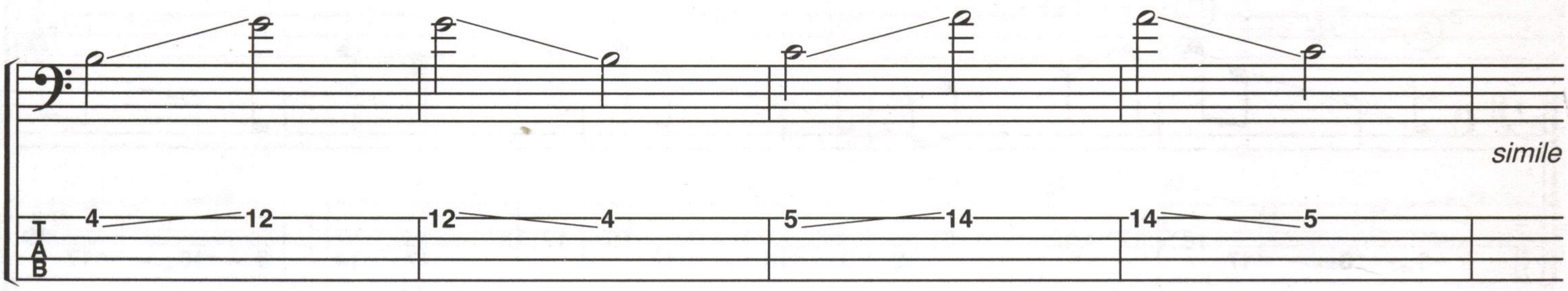
Exercise 3: Make the slide smooth, even though you are possibly switching fingers during the slide. Bars 8–10 should "melt" together.

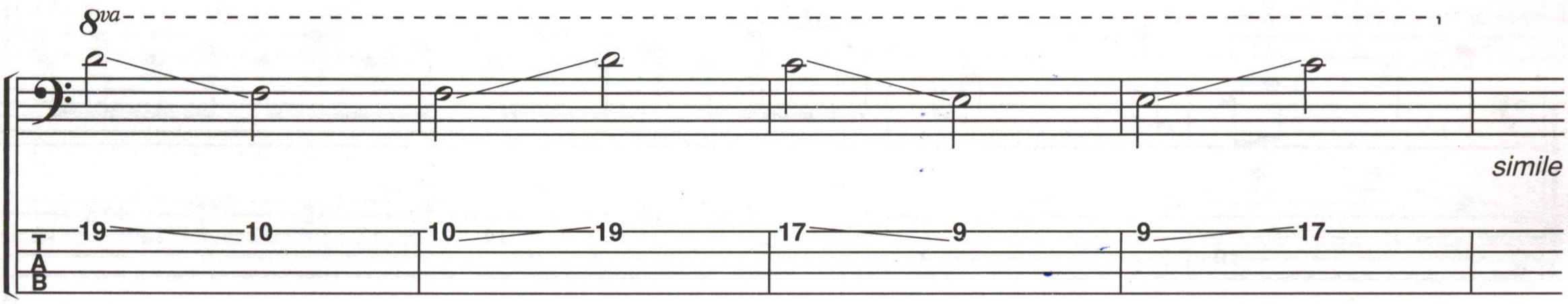


Exercise 4: Play these on one string and then try the blending technique described in Unit 10. After you get these down, work on speeding them up ever so gradually.









Play these to the extreme limits of your instrument, both higher and lower.

Combination

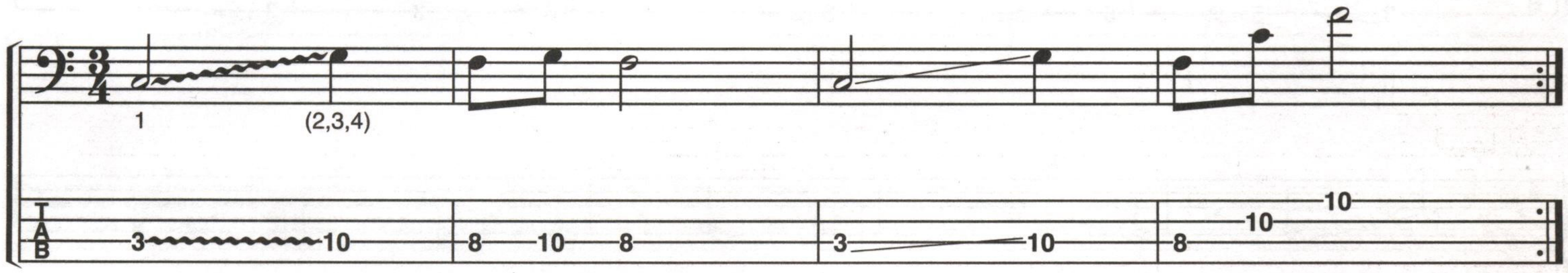
Exercise 5: Plan on these to take some time to play. Don't forget to use your open strings occasionally to check for pitch.

Try the same pattern in other keys, then switch tonalities (major, dominant, etc.). Also use the rhythmic variations following Exercise 2.

Unit 10: Blending Techniques

In many circumstances, you can get away with switching fingers on your long slides and glissandos; in other words, starting on 1 going up a fifth, you could blend your 1st, 2nd, or 3rd finger in on the way up or down. After a long slide, you might have a rather difficult figure to play. Using this blending technique strategically could make a difficult figure a little more playable by giving you a chance to alter your fingering. Here are some examples to work on.

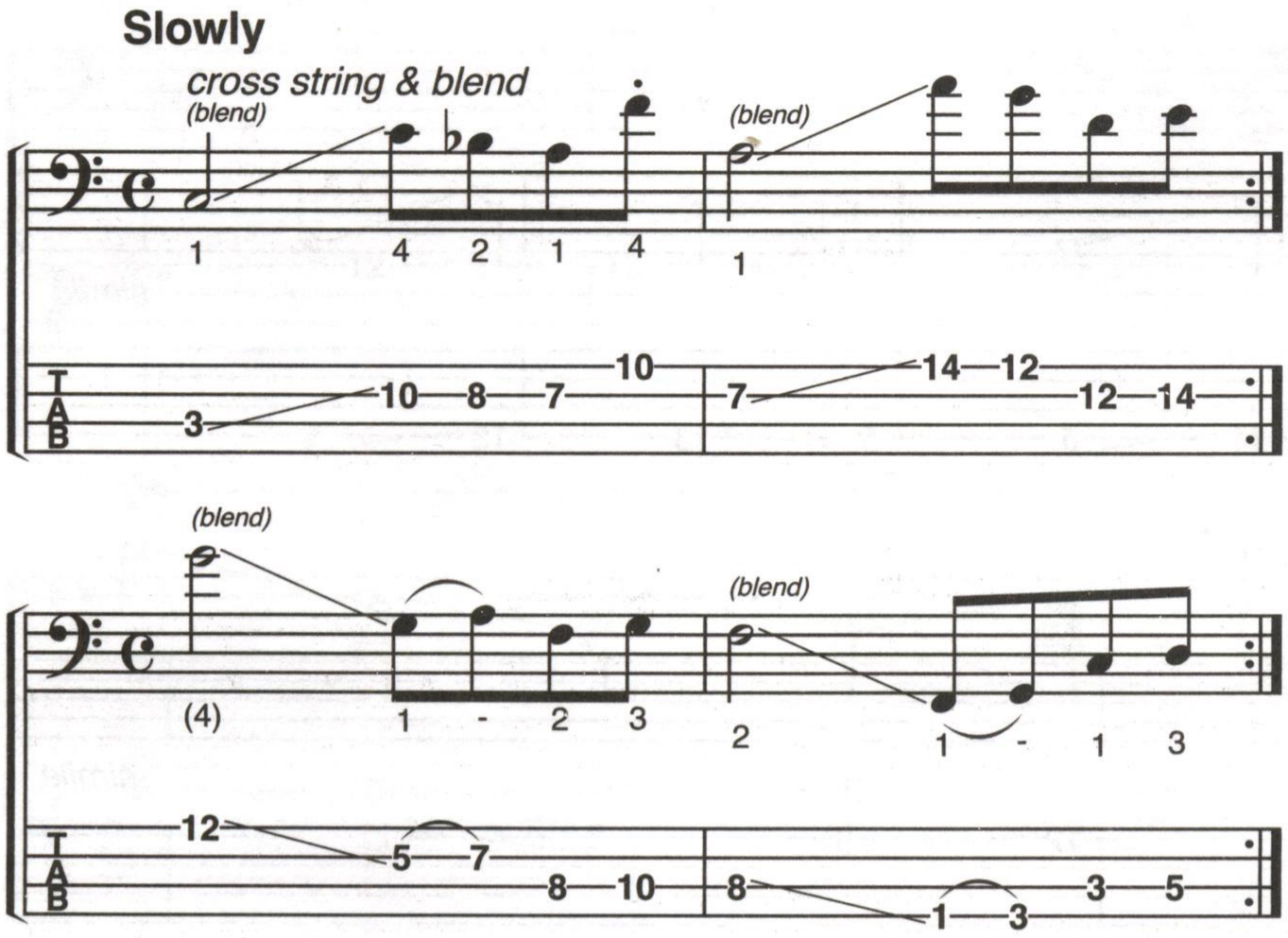
Exercise 1



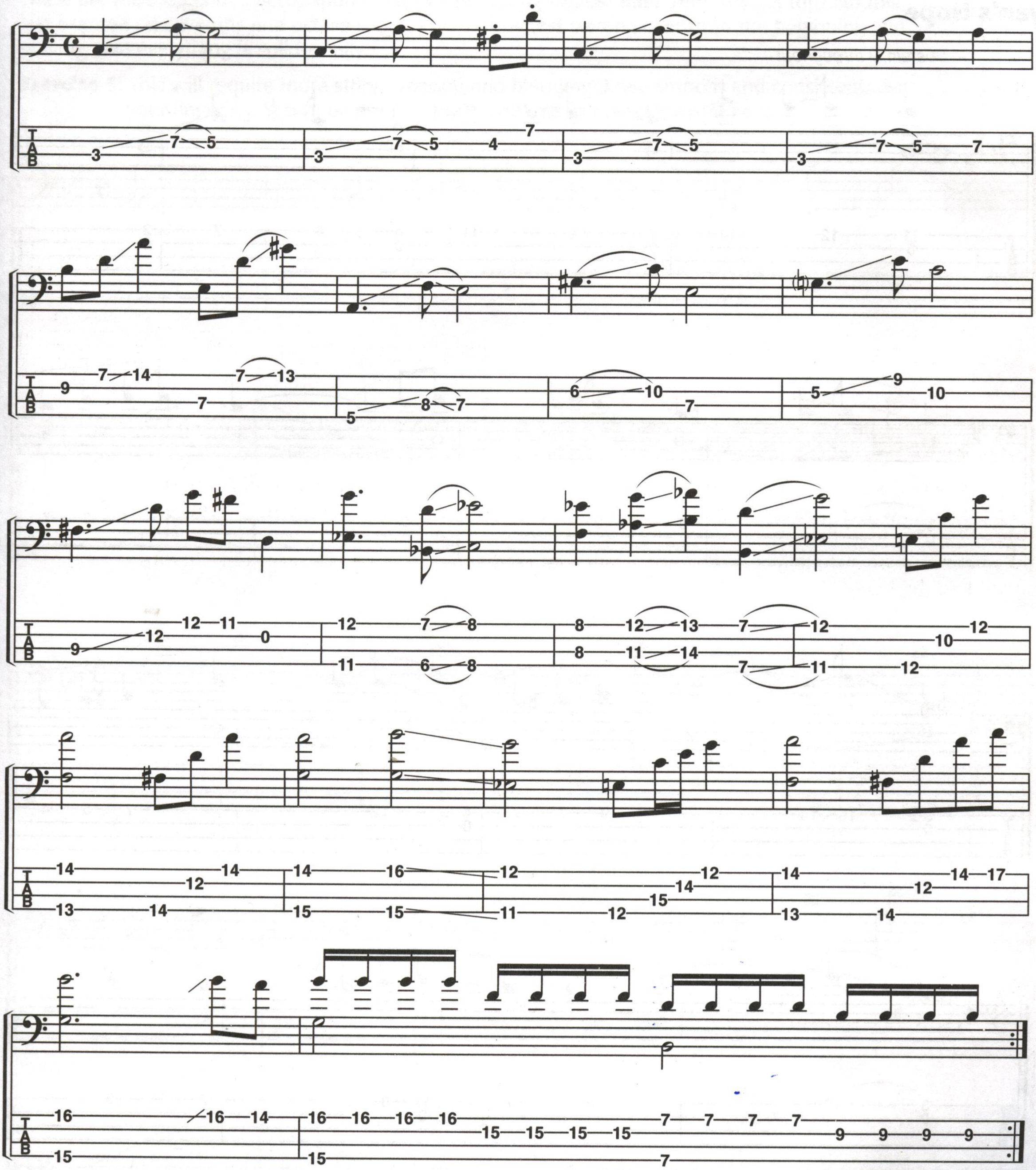
As you can see, the F in bars 2 and 4 would be a little more awkward if you did not blend and stayed on the first finger.

When a slide is extremely long, you may choose to start it on one string and end it on the next one (higher or lower). This is another blending technique that requires much practice to make smooth and not obvious. On this one, the right hand gets involved. You must pluck the other string very lightly as you slide and cross the string with your left-hand fingers. Ideally, this string crossing should not be heard.

Exercise 2



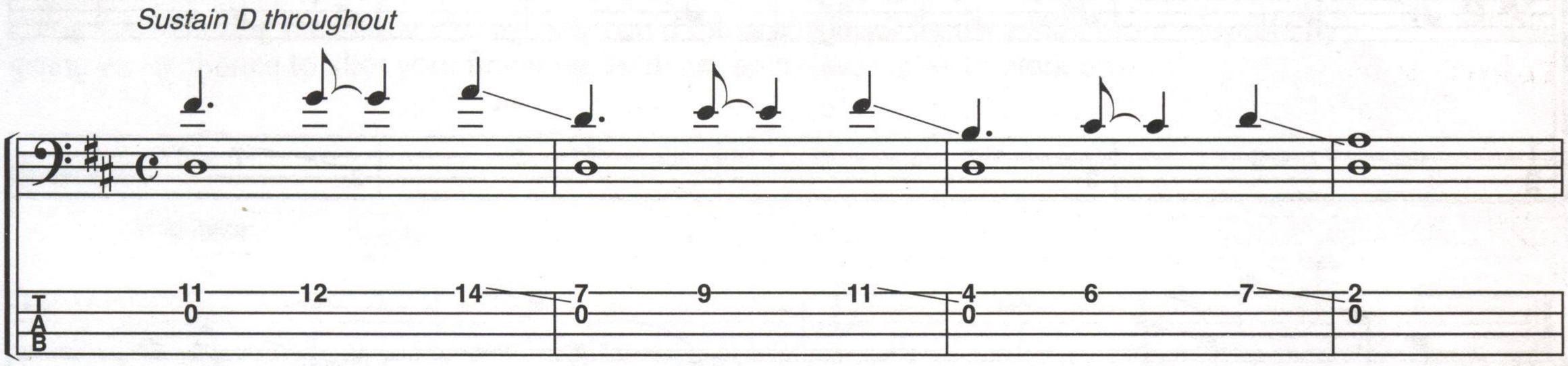
Exercise 3: Try the slides on both single and two strings using the blending technique. Strive for evenness of attack in your right hand and rhythmic solidarity.

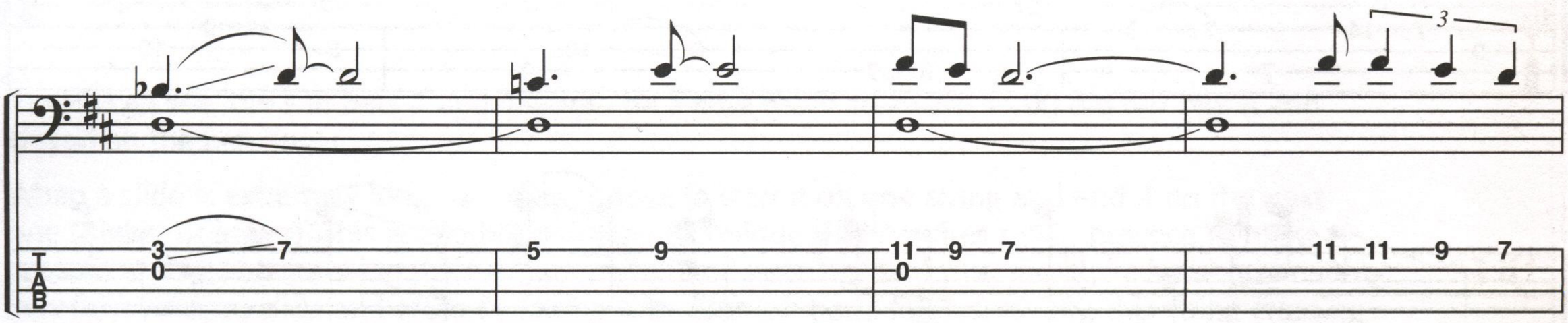


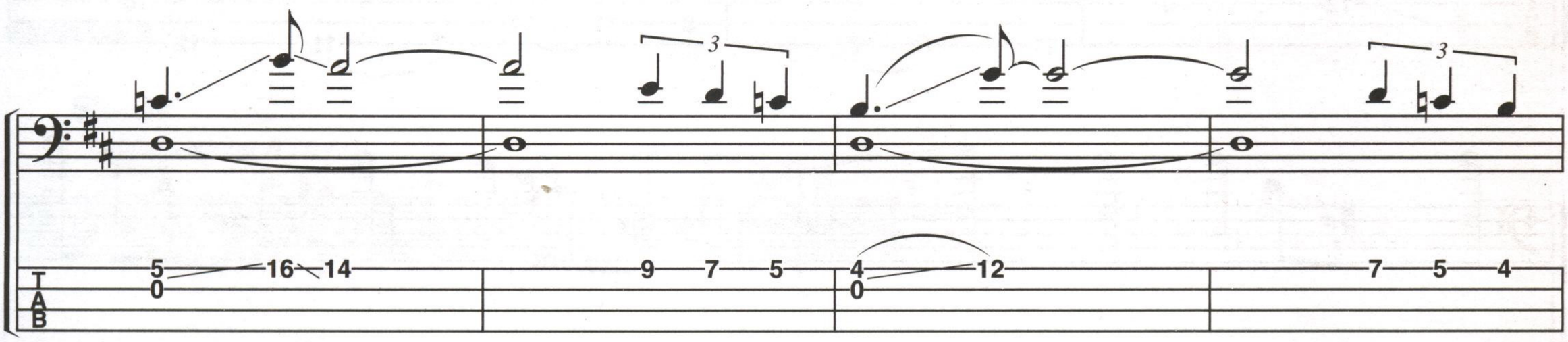
This one is extremely difficult. Write in your fingering.

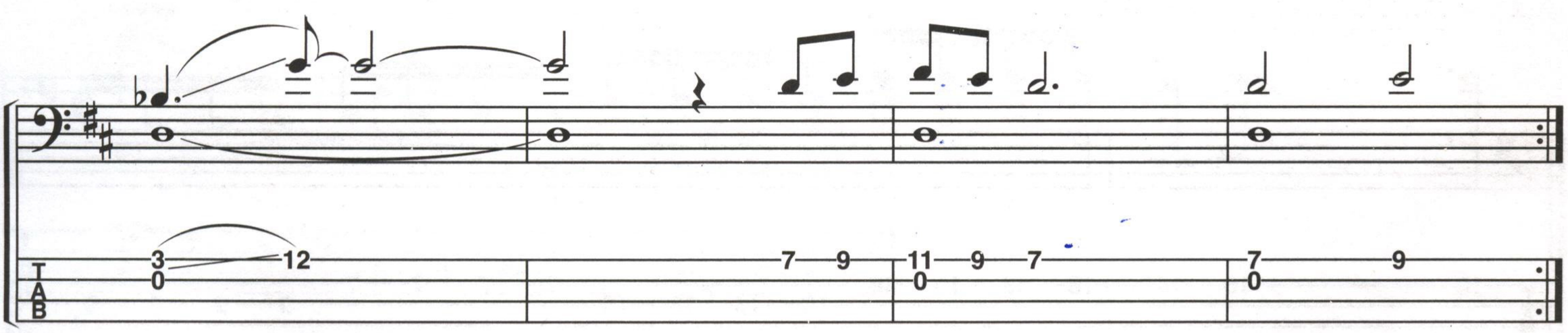
Exercise 4: Try the slides on both single and two strings using the blending technique.

Ryan's Hope







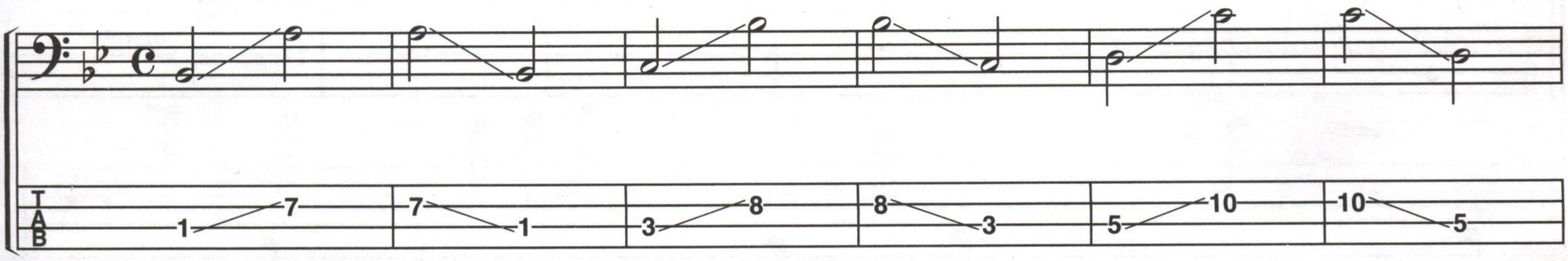


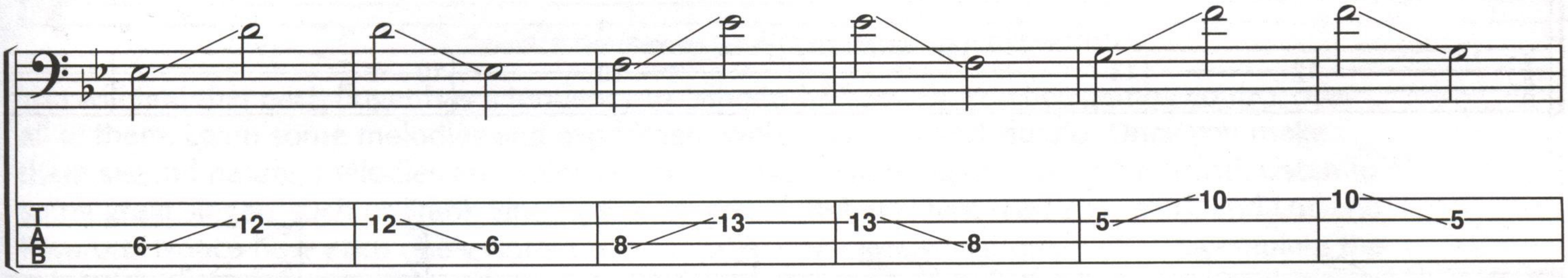
Make it musical. Don't forget some very slight vibrato on sustained notes.

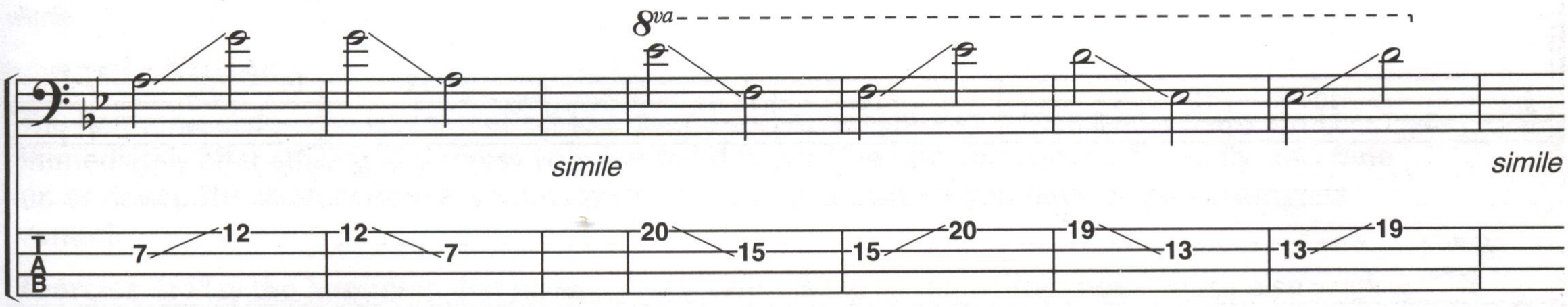
Seventh and Octave Slides

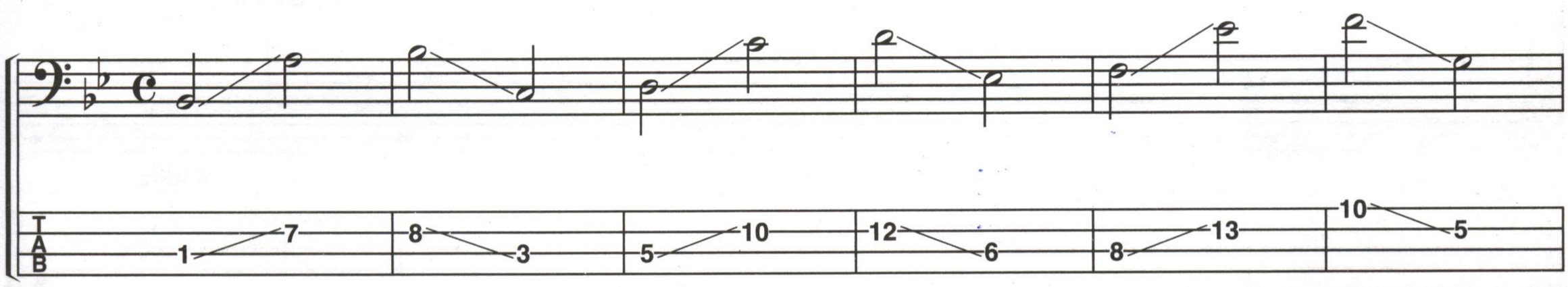
Throughout this course, our emphasis has been on intonation, shifting, fingering, and sliding. These are the indigenous occupational hazards of playing fretless bass. After we get through this last exercise on sevenths and octave slides, I would suggest starting over from the beginning and making sure everything is solid—really.

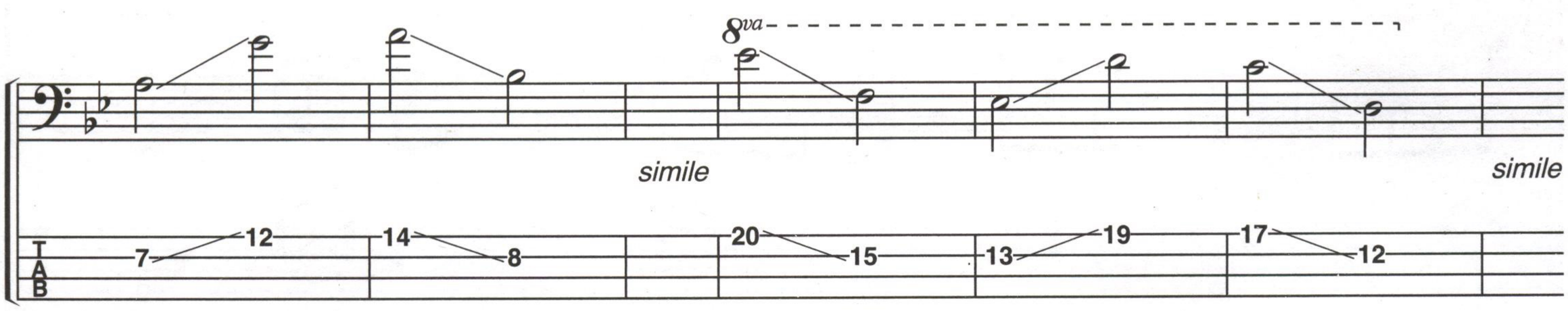
Exercise 5: This will require more string crossing and blending. Keep smooth and consistent. Vary your fingering. You must practice these patterns in many different keys.





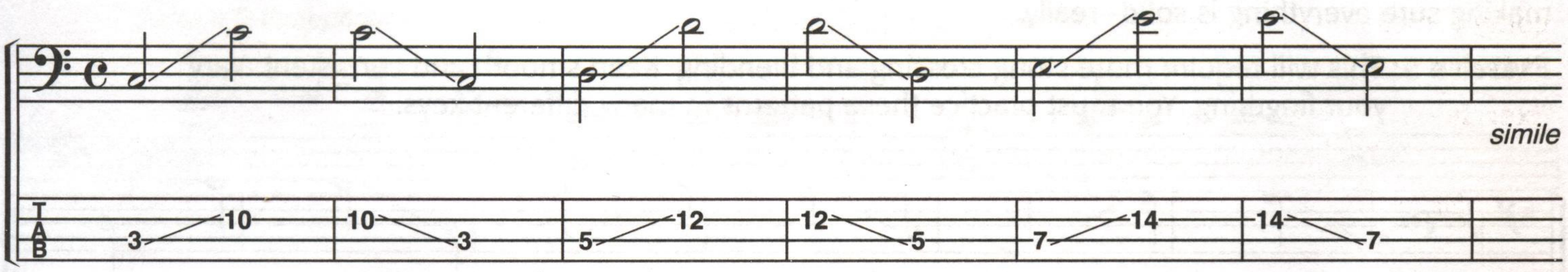


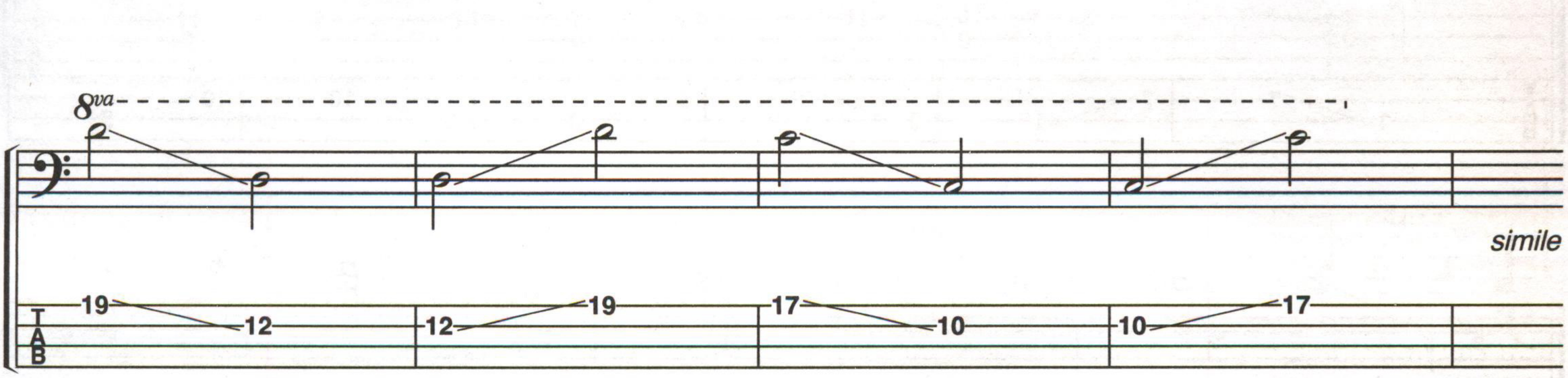


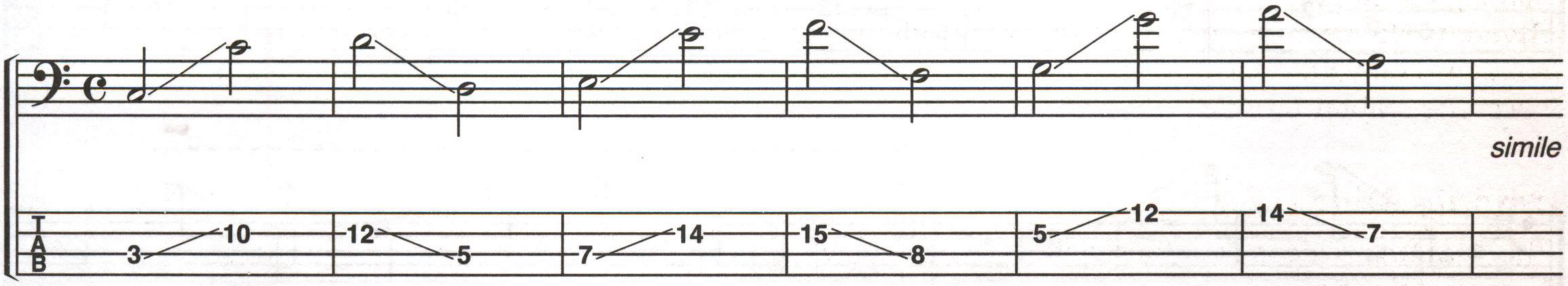


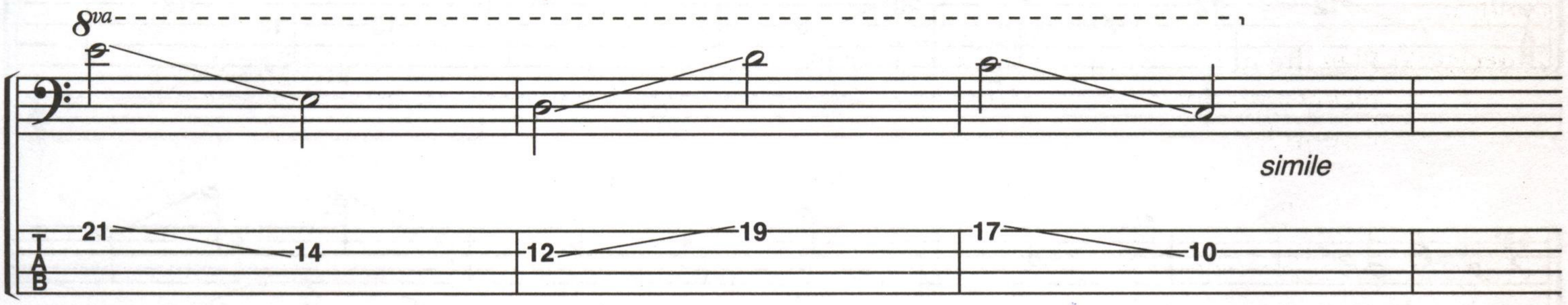
Octaves

Exercise 6: As you can see, there are endless combinations of fingerings and string crossings. You will have to discover what works best for you and your music.





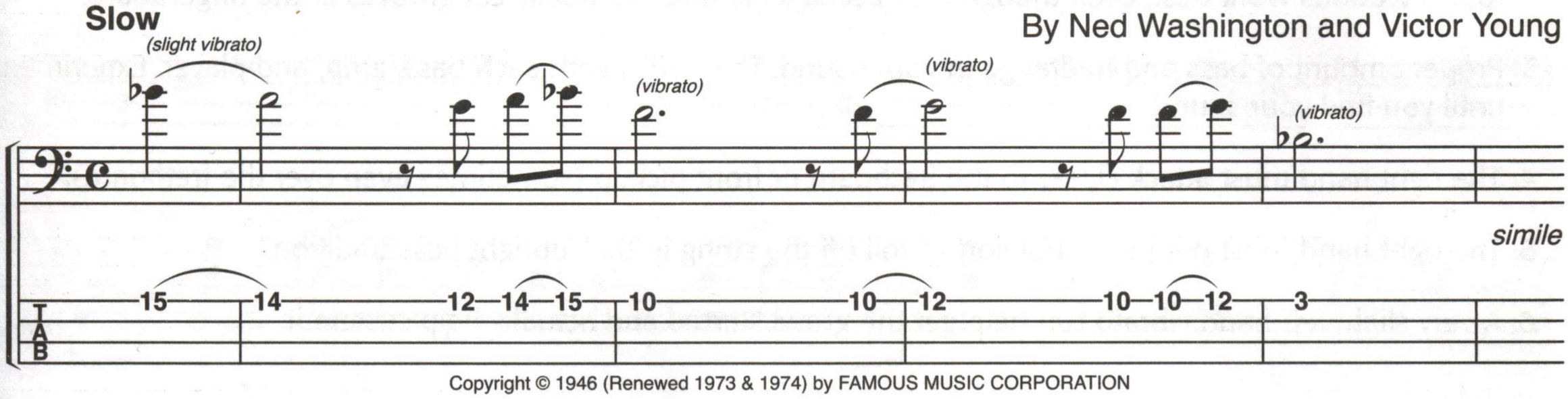




Unit 11: Fretless Effects—Vibrato, Harmonics, and Growl

Vibrato is another characteristic fretless technique. It involves the subtle back-and-forth motion of your left-hand finger. Combined with slight wrist motion, this can give a chorus effect. Be careful not to make your motions too wide or exaggerated, as you will obscure the pitch center and sound corny (unless for intended special effect). Vibrato adds sensitivity and personality to sustained notes as well as melodies. It can also help get the "acoustic growl" in the low register.

Exercise 1: Play this excerpt from "Stella by Starlight" with and without vibrato and glissando. You'll see the difference and how not to overuse it. Use the vibrato on the sustained notes.



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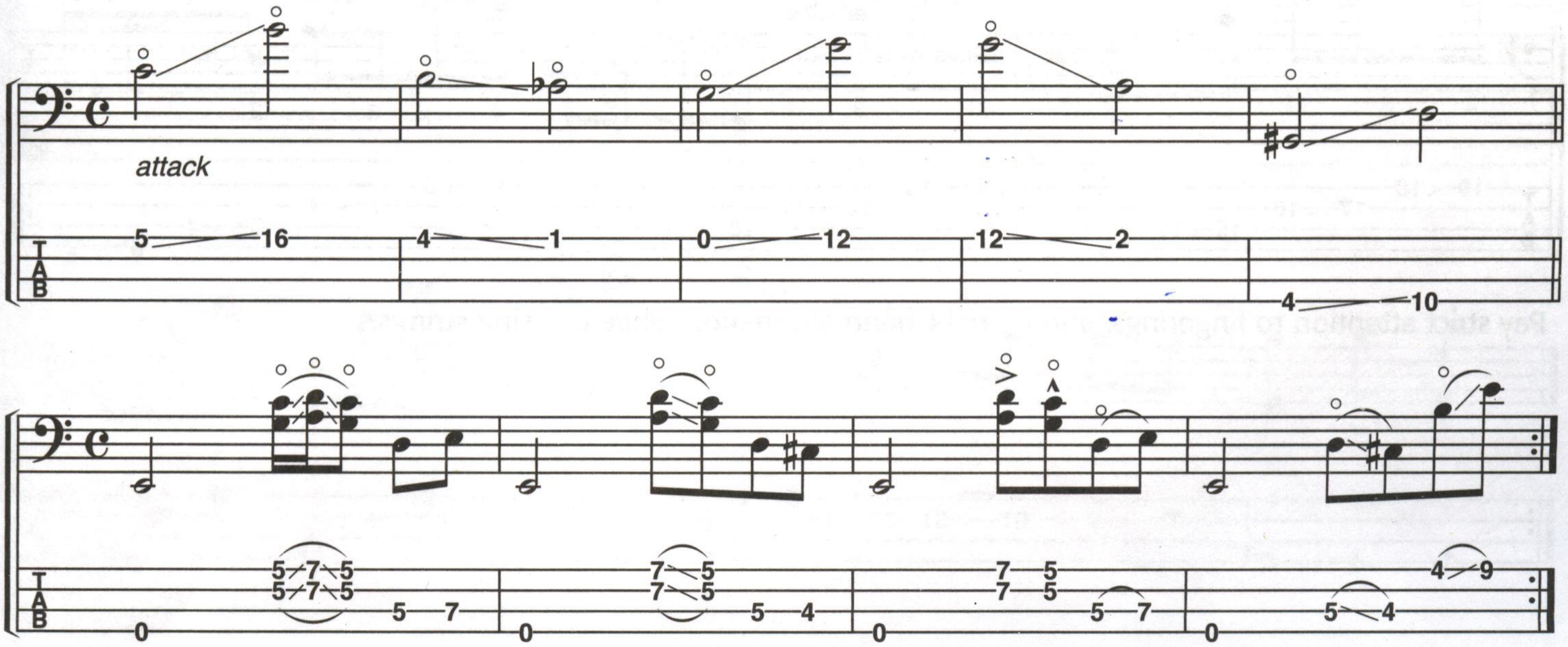
You will find that each finger has a tendency to "vibrate" differently. Practice getting control over all of them. Learn some melodies and experiment with glissando and vibrato. Once you make them second nature, melodies and solos will sound much more expressive and musical. Listen to some great singers such as Frank Sinatra, Ella Fitzgerald, Robert Plant (Led Zeppelin), and Luciano Pavarotti. Notice how each one's vibrato is different. Listen closely to them, and try to emulate the subtleties on your fretless. Also check out great sax players and other instrumentalists, and study each one's vibrato (or lack of vibrato).

Harmonic Slides

The harmonic slide is an intrinsic effect to be used very sparingly. Pop a harmonic on any string. Immediately after striking it, depress your left-hand finger (the one you just used) solidly, and slide up or down. The stratosphere is your range, but it is very effective if you have these in complete control.

Exercise 2: Play the harmonic that resides in the same place as the written note. These also work nicely with double stops. (These are to be played where the note is written, not where it sounds.)



Getting the Growl

When properly amplified and recorded, a fretless bass can approach that woody, earthy sound of an acoustic bass. These are the general requirements:

1. Hard fingerboard: ebony, graphite, or polyurethane finishes work best.

2. Relatively fresh strings, although brand-new ones can sometimes turn a growl into a buzz. I have found that round-wounds work best, even though they act as a file and eventually cut grooves in the fingerboard.

3. Proper amount of bass and midrange in your sound. This varies with each bass, amp, and player. Experiment until you find your sound.

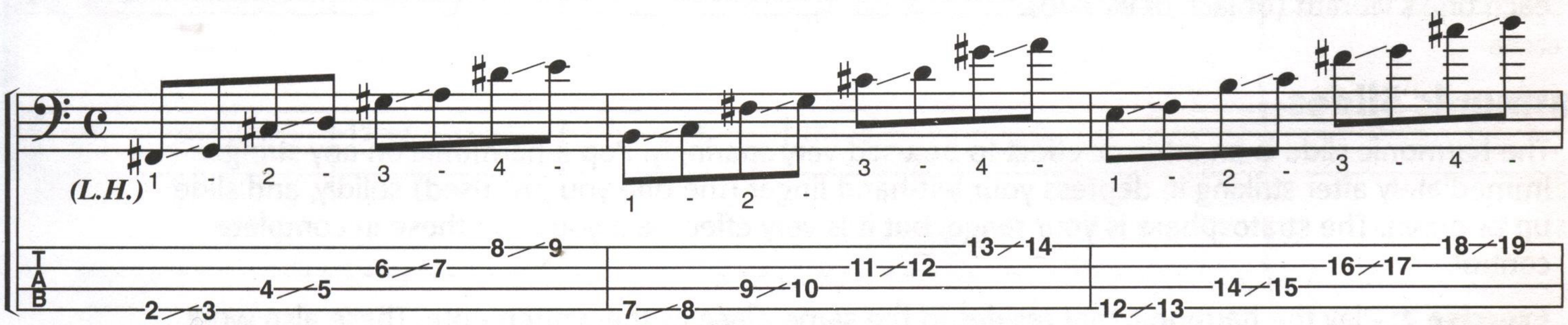
4. The right hand must attack closer to the fretboard or front pickup (sometimes even over the fretboard).

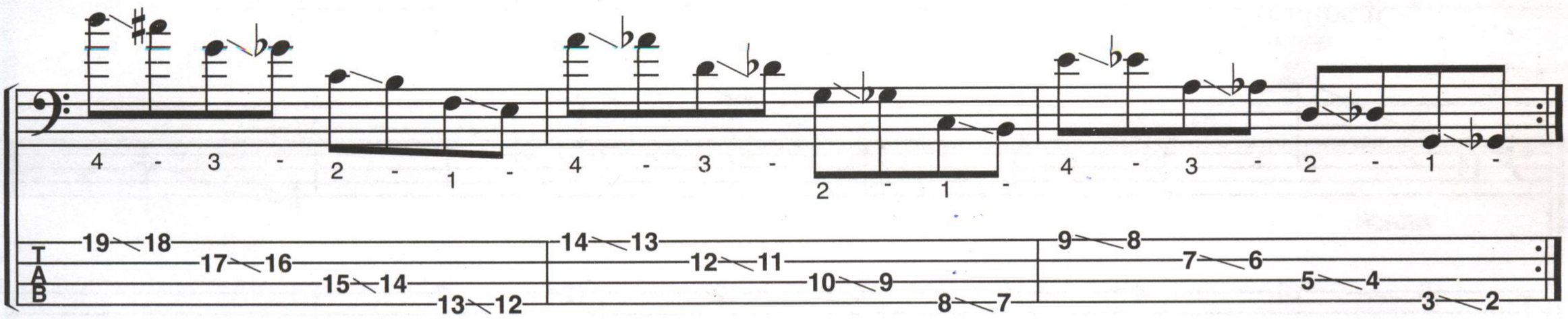
5. The right hand must not pluck, but sort of roll off the string in the "upright bass tradition."

6. A very slight left-hand vibrato can help get the growl started and actually help sustain it.

Assorted Stuff

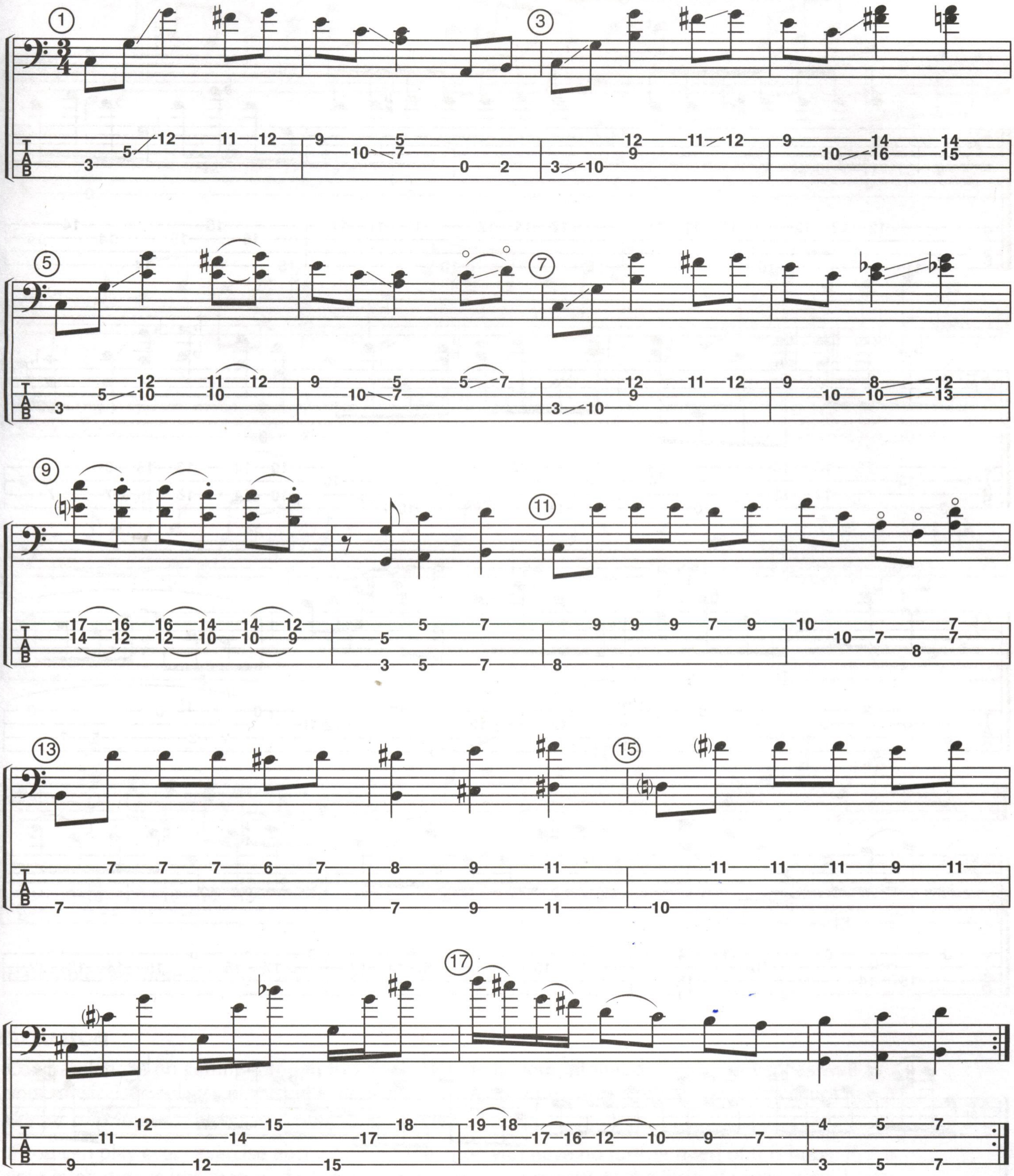
Exercise 3: These are designed to facilitate smoother string crossings using glissando.





Pay strict attention to fingerings, and try right-hand alternation while crossing strings.

Exercise 4: This exercise is a combination of just about everything. Be careful of the subtleties in bars 1 and 3. Notice the slides, and work out a logical, musical fingering. If you have major problems with fingerings, review the octave, sixth, and fifth sections. Also notice the harmonics. Play expressively.

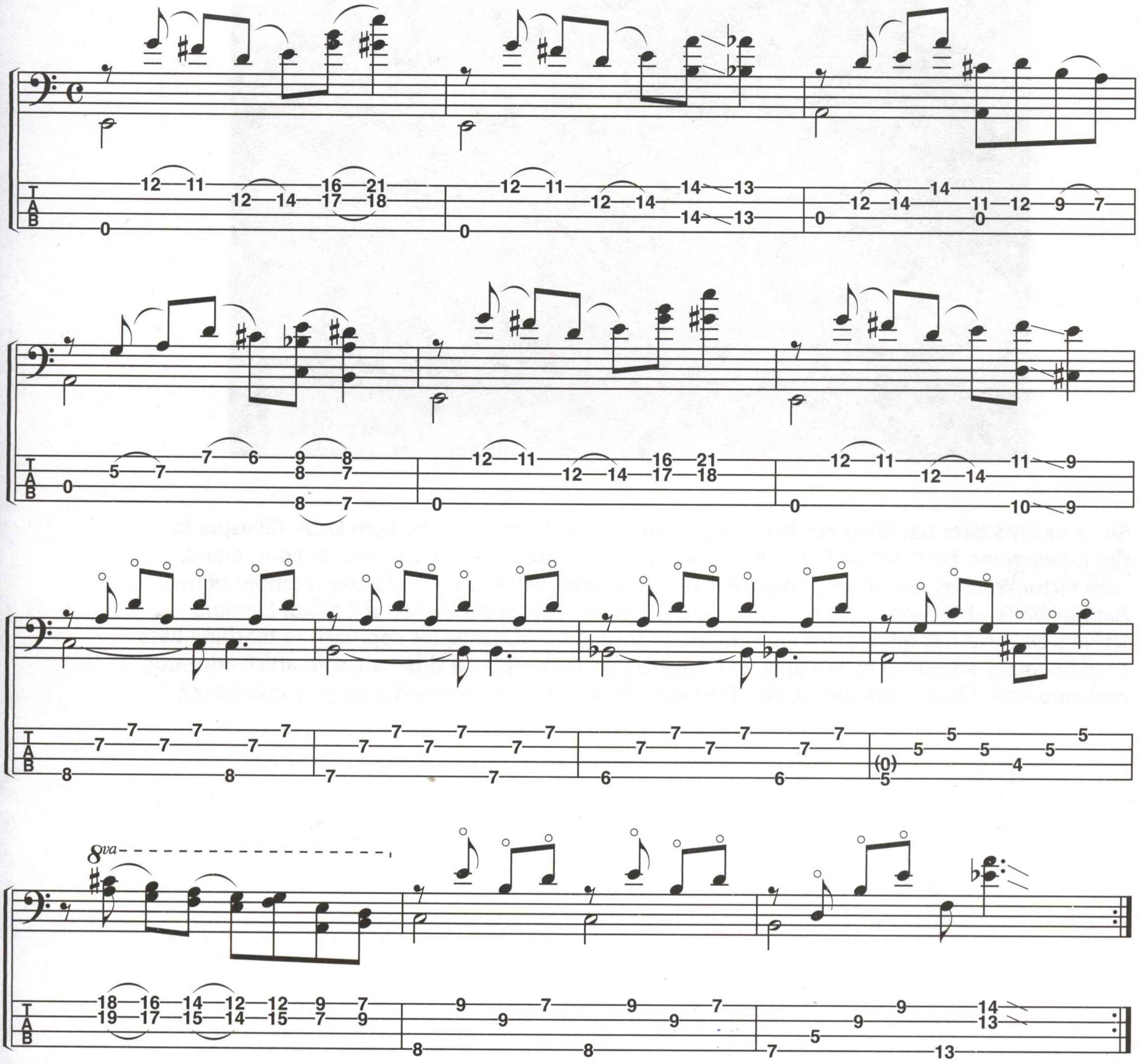


Melodic Fingering Exercises

Exercise 5: Let all notes sustain. Where convenient, play all G's open, with upper notes "singing" over the top. Make it more musical by adding dynamics and other nuances. Play as legato as possible, and concentrate on double-stop intonation. Please remember to experiment with alternate fingerings and positions.

Legato Fretless Etude

Exercise 6: Play this etude slow and legato. Make your fingerings logical and smooth. Be expressive. Let the bass notes ring throughout each measure.



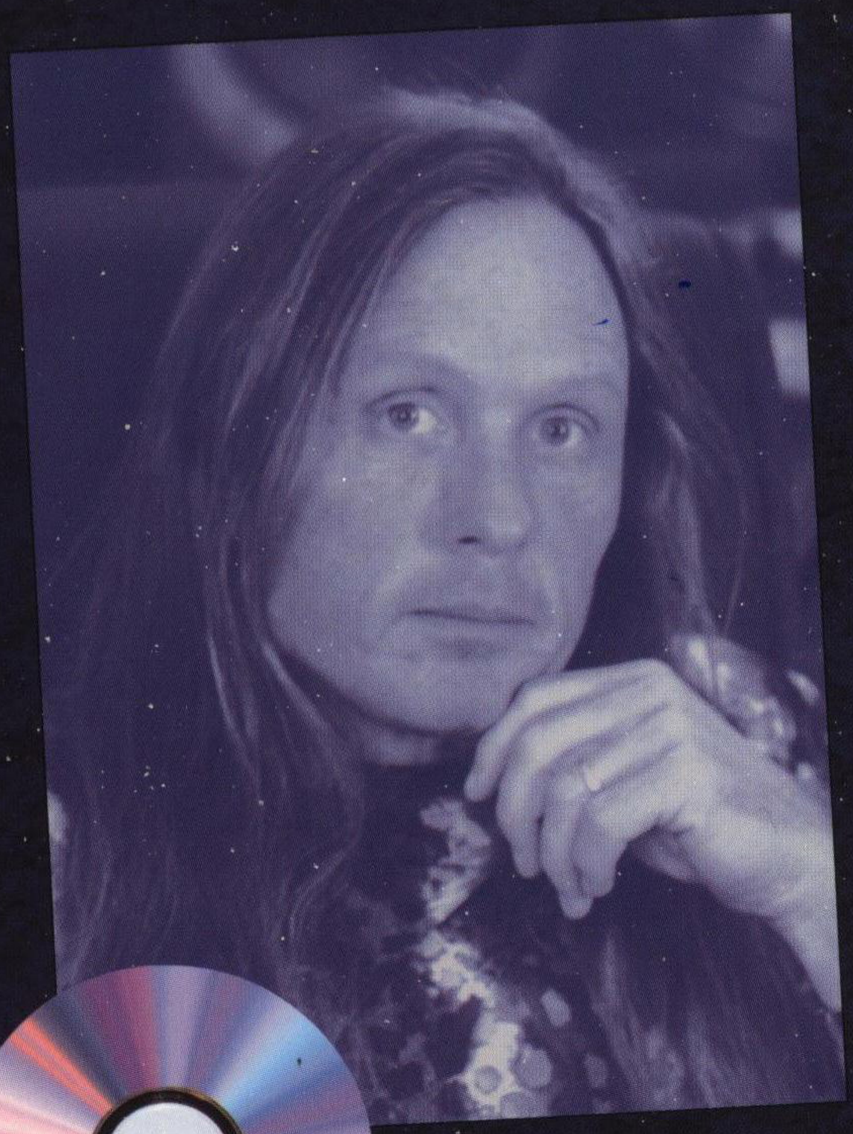
Harmonics are notated at the notes that they lie "under."

Conclusion

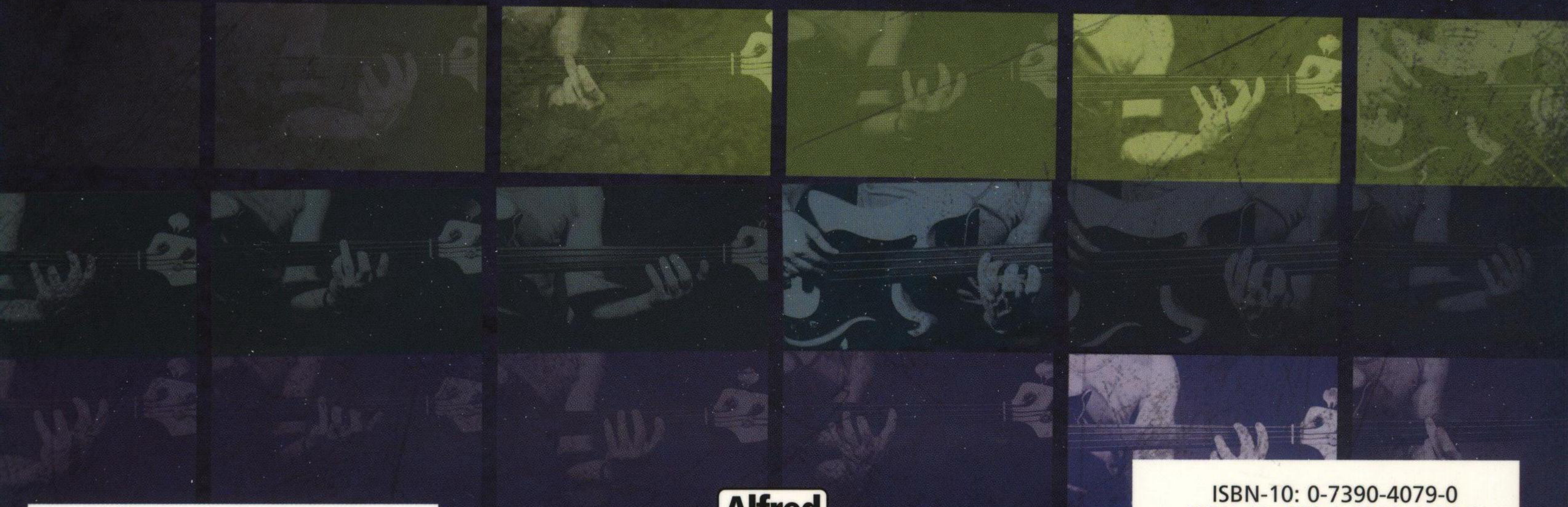
Congratulations on getting through this book. Hopefully, your intonation has improved, as well as your musical awareness of this difficult instrument. As you probably already know, this is not the end of your fretless studies, but only the beginning.

If you can play every exercise absolutely in tune, then you have no further need of this book. If your intonation is less than perfect, now is a good time to review. At the time of publication, I was on my eighth trip through page 39.

Steve Bailey's bass has filled out the low end for a wide range of artists, from Dizzy Gillespie to the Rippingtons, from Jethro Tull to Kitaro, from Willie Nelson to Larry Carlton. He co-founded, with Victor Wooten, the cutting-edge, all-bass group Bass Extremes. As a faculty member of the Bass Institute of Technology for 10 years and currently Artist in Residence at Coastal Carolina University, Steve has refined, through countless successful students, his approach to teaching bass fundamentals, advanced techniques, and fingerboard mastery. As a sideman, solo artist, educator, and innovator, Steve is known around the world for his mastery of this challenging instrument.



Consummate musician and bassist Steve Bailey presents one of the most comprehensive fretless bass technique methods available. Having performed and recorded with everyone from Dizzy Gillespie to Kitaro, Willie Nelson to Jethro Tull, Steve is a true master of the fretless bass. This book and DVD will help you successfully make the transition from fretted to fretless bass. The exercises within have both studio and live-playing applications and cover such topics as intonation, sliding, string blending, and fretless effects. Develop your ear and left-hand technique using the methodically written examples, which cover intervals as well as triads, then put it all to use in the songs and etudes provided. This book and DVD will help any bassist develop the necessary technique to master this difficult, but beautifully melodic, instrument.



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